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"Give me something that relates to my life" : exploring African American adolescent male identities through young adult literature

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“GIVE ME SOMETHING THAT RELATES TO MY LIFE”: EXPLORING AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT MALE IDENTITIES THROUGH YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

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For Richie, Caroline, Maria, and Abbie

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Preface

Connections forged with texts offer a powerful avenue for encouraging African American males to engage in schooling. This is possible because the "exchange with the text can become for the reader a process of self-creation" (Probst, 56). Reading and engaging with texts becomes a source of meaning creation, as the reader interacts with the text to create new meanings, each reading bringing about new understandings (Sumara, 2002). As a site of potential identity formation, reading texts "culminates in a sharpened, heightened sense of self" because "some part of the reader's conception of the world is confirmed, modified, or refuted, and that changes the reader" (Probst, p. 56). In short, engaging in the act of reading has the potential to create spaces for African American males to explore their identities and connections with formal school literacies.

Suggesting that reading literature can be empowering for African American males, Tatum (2009) states, "Engaging these young males in reading and writing texts that pay attention to their multiple identities…becomes a bridge to opportunities" (p. 14). Books that build so-called "textual lineages" are important because they build upon students' experiences and bridge the gap between their personal lives and their literate lives (Tatum, 2009). In this way, reading could offer classroom possibilities for African American males to explore their identities and shape their lives through powerful experiences via literature. And such experiences could help them explore the positive role of formal literacy in their lives.

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Abstract

Research suggests that when students realize a personal connection to their learning environment and feel their identities are supported, successful learning can take place (Nasir, 2012). Specifically, the use of texts that are meaningful to the lives of African American males can provide spaces for them to explore their unique identities (Tatum, 2009). Such texts can include young adult literature, which offers potential for motivating students to engage in reading, especially because of its themes relevant to teen readers. While much research exists about the various YAL books available, less is known about "what actually happens when teens read young adult novels" (Hayn, Kaplan, & Nolen, 2011). In light of this, through this dissertation I investigate what happens when a teacher uses two young adult novels with her students to explore their identities.

The purpose of this research was to explore African American adolescent male identities through young adult literature. Using ethnographic methods and two young adult novels, I conducted this research with eleven African American male students in Ms. Clark's second and third period English II classes at Bayou Central High School during the 2012-2013 school year. Data collection occurred throughout the two novel units and included classroom observations, participant interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and examination of student work. Student work samples included reading response journals, personal essays, group activities, and a culminating mural on identity. Data analysis involved coding to develop categories and themes, which were then triangulated with supporting data.

Findings were interpreted through a New Literacy Studies frame, as well as reader response theory. Findings suggest that participants found connections with young adult novels, particularly those containing characters or plots relating to participants' lives. Other findings

indicate that participants projected different identities, dependent upon the social scene in which they operated. In addition, data suggest participants found a lack of appreciation in school contexts for their out-of-school literate lives. Implications include the need for classroom teachers to craft a curriculum more reflective of the unique cultural identities of African American males, as well as inclusion of their out-of-school literacies in everyday learning experiences.

Chapter One: Introduction

My interest in African American adolescent males and schooling began when I accepted an administrative post at the public high school where I taught English. Admittedly, as a classroom teacher, I had noticed the disparities in achievement between black students and white students; I had noticed the cultural differences, one culture recognized and affirmed by the dominant culture and the other more discouraged and denied; and I had noticed the revolving door of school discipline (or "the dance" as I called it), where certain students of color would disappear for days on end, serving their detentions and suspensions and returning to class only temporarily before disappearing once again; some would become permanent victims of the system, never to repeat the dance. Yes, I had noticed all of these inequalities and injustices but, like many other classroom teachers, had come to expect them and accept them. This acceptance ended some time during the first month of my administrative experience.

It was at this time that I witnessed first-hand the daily struggles endured by our African American males as they attempted to navigate the educational system. I saw the discipline statistics revealing the overwhelming majority of discipline referrals, in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions belonged to black students. And I noticed the manner in which authority figures addressed these students—as though their fates were predetermined, marked for failure, and they appeared powerless to change their situations. I saw how African American males moved toward the office when they were called in for discipline. Their hands were shoved deep into their pockets or put behind their backs; their heads hung down; and they shuffled ever so slowly. Their uniforms were most likely out of compliance with the dress code to some degree, whether through sagging pants or an untucked shirt. It seemed as though they already knew the fates that awaited them—the referrals taken at face value with no chance to defend

themselves. To their credit, some attempted a verbal protest or resistance of some sort, whether through rolling of the eyes, a loud exhale, or a refusal to sign the referral. But in the end, at least in my mind, it appeared that the system was set up to doom these students to failure. With the compelling evidence there before me, I refused to perpetuate the continual cycle of failure that sought to ensnare these young men, and I remember the moment I bowed out of the dance.

The morning announcements had just ended, and the list of students being called to the office for discipline was read over the intercom. The school's six administrators took their positions at the office counter, where the discipline referrals had been placed. As students reported to the office, one administrator would read the name aloud, and another administrator would "process" the referral for that student. This ritual involved a simple reading aloud of the charge, a reading aloud of the consequence, and then a command to "sign by the X." The routine continued in this fashion until all students—sometimes as many as thirty—were processed.

The aforementioned ritual was typically undertaken for students incurring detentions and in-school suspensions (the lighter sentences). Out-of-school suspensions, however, required a visit to an administrator's office, where paper work was printed and signed, and parents were called and notified. On this particular day, a male administrator (known to be the guru of student discipline) handed me two referrals with orders to "take those two students with you and process these." At the top of the referrals, he had already written the consequences to be given to the two students, and he motioned for the two young men to follow me to my office.

As I sat on the other side of my desk looking into the eyes of the two African American male students, I began to struggle internally with my instructions, which called for suspending the two young men for three days out of school. The charge: "disturbing the educational process." The procedure was plain and simple, and the task could be completed in less than five

minutes. But it was not the procedure with which I struggled. I knew deep inside the sheer subjectivity of this charge, the fact that so many other students were guilty of the same, and the understanding that these suspensions, if carried out, would not only fail to remediate these boys but also push them further along the fast track to expulsion.

In my office that day, I chose remediation over suspension. Rather than take five minutes to process the charges and send the students on their way, I took thirty minutes to speak to these young men, establish rapport with them, and convince them I was not just another white authority figure determined to purge our school of their presence. In exchange for promises of better behavior, I assigned them to after-school detention, going against my superior's orders to suspend them out of school. This was admittedly a large risk for me and my job. But the alternative was an even greater risk for these young men and their futures.

My actions that day eventually brought me increased scrutiny and alienation, as my disregard for disciplinary consequence procedures was discovered. A fellow administrator, citing my more counselor-like dealings with students, even asked, "You sure you're an administrator?", as though the two occupations existed at opposite ends of a continuum. In her mind, they did. And in the minds of my fellow administrators, my own occupation would soon exist at the opposite end of the campus. Upon my return from a year-long sabbatical leave, I would be returned to the classroom as an English teacher, effectively stripped of my administrative role.

The point to be made here does not concern the ultimate fate of my administrative aspirations. Rather my administrative experiences have provided my first-hand witnessing of challenges African American males encounter in schooling. My returning to the classroom has likewise afforded me the opportunity to influence change for these young men but on another level. Rather than simply providing a last resort for our African American males at the end of the

disciplinary pipeline, I now encounter them in the beginning, where possibilities abound for engaging them in conversations and explorations through the English classroom as I seek to prevent the cycle of discipline from ever beginning. I recognize that in order to keep many of these students out of the office, they must see a place for themselves in the classroom, some connection with schooling.

Seeking to foster this connection, however, requires an understanding of the different ways African American males view schooling, how they construct notions of masculinity through schooling, and how they perceive formal literacy. Investigating these areas is valuable because, in order to better assist these young men in connecting with and recognizing the importance of education, we must first seek to understand how education fits into their lives at the present moment. Such an inquiry must proceed, however, with the understanding that African American males do not comprise a homogenous grouping of individuals but instead represent diverse, complex attitudes, backgrounds, and experiences.

African American Males, Schooling, and Identities

If current statistics provide any insight into the connections between African American adolescent males and schooling, the indications are dismal.[1] Countless studies, reports, and texts detail the bleak outlook for young African American males, and various statistics suggest that our nation's public school systems are failing them (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006; The Council of the Great City Schools, 2010). Consider that in 2008, Black males were nearly twice as likely to drop out of high school as white males; furthermore, in 2006, Black students were three times more likely than White students to be suspended from school (The Council of the Great City Schools, 2010). At present, large numbers of African American

[1] Many researchers take issue with the pervasive failure narrative surrounding African American males and schooling. Howard (2010) suggests that this perspective becomes problematic when one examines the ways this perspective socially situates these students both in school and out of school.

students eventually drop out of school and are statistically more likely to end up in prison than to enroll in college (Murrell, 2002, p. 7). According to Noguera (2003), "All of the most important quality-of-life indicators suggest that African American males are in deep trouble" (p. 431).

Recent research also suggests a continued lag in progress in reading for Black students overall, significant because of recent correlations made between students' levels of reading proficiency and years spent in poverty, with high school graduation rates. This is important for African American male students because overall, Black students are more likely to live in poverty and attend low-performing schools, which holds implications for high school graduation rates. Specifically, "among those [students] who spend at least a year in poverty and don't read proficiently, the rates for not graduating from high school rise to 31% for Black students" (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, April 2011).

Schooling, however, still fails to captivate many young African American men, particularly with regard to their distinct identities, leaving rich opportunities and possibilities beyond their reach (Tatum, 2009). More specifically, in the classroom, many African American males fail to see themselves reflected in their curriculum, leaving their own unique experiences and identities absent from the texts they read and discuss in their classes. Opportunities are lost as texts African American males read in their classes fail to capture them, do not establish spaces for their unique cultures, and cause them to feel inferior. In addition, schools often signify isolating places for many African American male students, who begin to view themselves *in opposition to* schooling rather than *in connection with* schooling (Ogbu, 1986). Schooling, which could represent opportunity for better lives for these students, instead often symbolizes yet another channel through which African American male students are made to feel isolated and disenchanted.

Schools play a significant role in the formation of identities for African American male students, and countless studies document disproportionality for African American males not only in discipline but also in special education placement (Hilliard, 1995; Arnez, as cited in Kunjufu, 1985). Furthermore, various scholars have written about lower expectations for African American males in schools, as well as negative labeling and stereotyping for these students (Kunjufu, 1986; Mahiri, 1997; Ferguson, 2000; Delpit, 2006). Taken together, these inequities function to craft negative identities for African American male students.

The existence of these and other challenges often arises from underlying mismatches between students' cultures and the culture associated with formal schooling (Willis, 1981). As a result, many African American males seek affirmation elsewhere and begin to locate their identities in other venues. However, it is erroneous to assume that African American males are passive, submissive individuals who merely accept their fates as determined by educational institutions. Rather, the dynamic between these students and schooling exists as a complex relationship, particularly regarding the agency these boys possess and enact.

African American Males and Agency

Over the years, various community activists, policymakers, and scholars have nobly advocated countless reform efforts, policies, and programs in their quest to improve the plight of African American males in our school systems. However, such efforts, while necessary, have merely focused on improving the situations of these individuals, denying the existence of agency. An examination of the myriad cultural and environmental factors influencing the educational lives of African American males without an accompanying regard for the methods these students employ to actively construct their identities, denies the agency these young men possess, the potential they have to influence their experiences. In other words, this view

reinforces the stereotype of African American males as passive victims of repression and marginalization. Furthermore, this perspective provides a convenient "scapegoat" for the failure of schools to educate these young men, further depicting them as objects to be controlled rather than educated (Haddix, 2009/ 2010). Rather, research must examine the various means through which African American males actively define themselves, construct masculinity, and make sense of their worlds in light of the various challenges they face in educational institutions. Simply put, we must not only illuminate the obstacles these young men face in school; we must also examine the methods they employ to actively navigate the system and the ways in which these experiences influence their constructions of masculinity. Such a perspective requires an understanding of the complex ways in which African American males construct identities.

Understanding these identity constructions is important for building connections between these young men and schooling. In other words, to foster an educational environment that encourages the active involvement of African American male students and instills in them a sense of belonging, we must first seek to understand how they make sense of who they are and what forms of literacy they value. Understanding the various ways African American males actively construct masculinity amidst cultural and environmental factors present in their everyday lives, namely in schooling, can serve as a catalyst for better engaging these students with schooling.

African American Males and the Power of Texts

As stated earlier, connecting our young black men with education has never been more critical. Yet various statistics suggest that our nation's public school systems are failing our African American students (The Council of the Great City Schools, 2010; Noguera, 2003). Therefore, many African American adolescent males find schools to be isolating spaces—an

isolation that deepens when they fail to locate places for belonging within the classroom, and find instead a dearth of experiences through which they might locate connections between themselves and texts they read in school. For example, Tatum (2009) states, "They lack sufficient exposure to texts that they find meaningful and that will help them critique, understand, and move beyond some of the turmoil-related experiences they encounter outside school" (p. xii). In short, whereas texts could serve to assist these students in making sense of their worlds, many of these young men continue to view themselves and schooling as occupying opposite ends of a continuum, and a priceless opportunity is missed. By this I refer to the awesome powers inherent in literacy, specifically reading. If teachers can connect these young men with reading, get them interested in reading, promote lifelong interest in reading, then teachers possibly can help these students realize a sense of belonging in schooling. Perhaps even more importantly, reading can encourage students to begin to envision and consider "their possible selves," leading to an examining and eventual forming of their identities through reading (Richardson & Eccles, 2007).

Such readings might involve what Tatum (2009) terms "enabling texts," powerful texts these youth can use to create opportunities for themselves, texts with which they can identify and which speak to their unique cultures, books they find meaningful and important.[2] Connecting African American males with such books is not only essential for encouraging their personal development but for connecting them with schooling and, ultimately, inspiring them to become lifelong readers. In this light, Tatum (2009) states, "Once they read a powerful book, powerful essay, or powerful poem that sparks their humanity, they can never return to a place or stance of

[2] Tatum (2008) terms the opposite of the "enabling text" the "disabling text," which serves to reify the image of African American males as struggling readers.

unknowing with regard to the power found in words and how words can awaken the human spirit" (p. 68).

Such powerful texts value students' unique cultures and encourage them to reflect upon their lives. Perhaps more important are the spaces for identity formation these books may provide. Simply put, reading can become part of these students' constructions of identity rather than exist in opposition to their identities, and these students just might realize the amazing potential inherent in reading.[3]

Young adult literature offers an opportunity to explore these constructions, as well as providing welcoming spaces for African American males in the classroom. What I refer to here are the possibilities of using young adult literature to encourage connections between African American males and reading and encourage them to explore identity formations. The potential for young adult literature in this regard is limitless. As Alsup (2003) states, "Young adult literature seems to have special potential to help students understand their tumultuous time of life" (p. 160). If students can find material to which they relate, they may be more inclined to participate in class activities surrounding these issues. Furthermore, such a classroom may be better aligned with cultural relevance, better safeguarding the uniqueness of minority cultures upon their interaction with more dominant cultures. In this regard, Ladson-Billings (1994) states, "The primary aim of culturally relevant teaching is to assist in the development of a 'relevant black personality' that allows African American students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture" (p. 17). In this way, students come to view themselves *as part of* the curriculum rather than *in opposition to* the curriculum.

[3] I acknowledge here that so-called "disabling texts," while not the focus of this research, also function in identity formation, albeit in negative ways.

Author Sharon Flake (2008) suggests that one of the explanations for African American boys' aversion to reading may lie in the fact that many of the books they read in school are not reflective of their lives. Flake (2008) states, "In the world of young adult literature, Black youth aren't just a minority on the pages of a book, they are an endangered species" (p. 14). As a result, using culturally relevant reading materials may better encourage these students to engage in reading, encourage self-efficacy among students (Feger, 2006), and help shape their "cultural identity" (De Leon, 2002). Simply put, if students connect with reading and realize a sense of belonging through the English classroom, then schooling may become for them a recognized component of their identities and encourage the construction of positive experiences.[4]

Part of connecting African American males with schooling involves selecting texts that enable them to see themselves in what they read. In other words, encouraging these students to engage in reading will require the act of reading itself to become part of their identities—not existing in tension with their identities but actively part of the formation of these identities. And the inclusion of reading in their identities requires the selection of books to which these young men can readily connect. In this frame of mind, reading becomes much more significant than merely a means to attain course objectives or standardized test scores. As Kirkland (2011) suggests, "The practice of reading for young Black men is rarely about reading alone. It is about who they are, what they believe, and who they want others to see them as" (p. 206). Reading books that encourage the development of African American males' identities, then, can offer these students both a reflection of who they are at present and enable them to forge identities inclusive of reading, encouraging their participation in schooling.

[4] This is not to assume that if students engage in positive literary experiences in ELA classrooms, that they will, therefore, have similar experiences in all other classrooms across the curriculum. I proceed with the optimism that one powerful classroom experience can impact a student's entire outlook on schooling.

With this in mind, young adult literature can serve as a platform on which to help students construct these experiences. Perhaps if our young men see themselves in what they read, they might begin to identify with schooling as a venue for opportunity and infinite possibilities. In this regard, Tatum (2009) states, "We need to (re)connect African American adolescent males with texts in order to begin shaping a positive life trajectory for them" (p. 55). Through reading what Tatum considers "enabling" texts, African American males can better identify with literary texts, construct experiences through their reading, and come to view schooling in a more positive light. In this regard, young adult literature can offer powerful connections between real-life events in students' lives and an entry point to reading. Because these texts contain events similar to those the students encounter, young adult literature, in its "authentic representation of students' experiences," can encourage these students to relate to characters' lives and engage in reading (Bach, Choate, & Parker, 2011).

Theoretical Frames

Reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1995) offers an ideal theoretical lens for examining the processes through which African American adolescent males construct their identities through reading. With its focus upon the reader's active role in reading, its relocation of meaning from something inherent in the text to a creation resulting from interaction of reader and text, and its recognition of meaning creation as recursive and ongoing, reader response represents a distinct departure from previously held notions centering meaning within the text itself, inviting a reconsideration of existing assumptions regarding meanings, texts, and the location of authority in the reading process. In contrast to formalist notions of meaning inherent in the text, an understanding of reading with a reader response lens relocates authority from the author and the text to the reader and his interaction with the text. Meaning, then, is not viewed as pre-existing,

awaiting discovery, but rather something created through an engagement, an active process in which the reader acquires agency. As a result, the text is no longer a stagnant, fixed entity. Rather, as viewed through reader response theory, the text is a living document, providing spaces for crafting identity and taking into account diverse cultural codes, historical backgrounds, and experiences. In considering reading as socially constructed, reader response theory invites teachers to consider the diverse ways in which students may potentially engage with the text, form relationships with the text, and forge new understandings with the text. Far more than being regarded as a pedagogical tool, the text offers the potential for democracy in the classroom, where diversity is celebrated, and students are encouraged to think creatively and critically (Fish, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1995; Sumara, 2002). In this regard, reader response theory presents a unique opportunity for studying the ways in which considers African American adolescent males connect with reading and construct experiences through literature.

Also informing the present study is a sociocultural view of literacy, which considers meaning as shaped by people's identities and their memberships in particular groups within a culture (Gee, 2008; Johnson, 2009). In other words, meanings are negotiated by individuals who share commonalities in background or knowledge. In advocating a different way of considering meaning, Gee (2008) states, "Meaning is not something locked away in heads…Meaning is something we negotiate and contest over socially" (p. 13). Specifically regarding this perspective and reader response, Brooks and Browne (2012) suggest that reader response theory is more valuable when culture is considered within the reader response theoretical frame. Because of the wide variety of cultural backgrounds and experiences students bring to the reading process, Brooks and Browne (2012) suggest a "broader range of literary interpretations" as informed by the diversity of student cultures (p. 75). The authors, therefore, advocate a "culturally based

reader response theory," whereby attempt is made to examine connections between culture and reader response (p. 76). Regarding the significance of this theoretical perspective, Brooks and Browne (2012) state, "Understanding that a range of cultural positions factors into students' meaning making compels us, we argue, to mine texts more carefully for cultural milieu as well as find acceptance with a broader range of literary interpretations (p. 83). This theoretical perspective fits well with the present study and its focus on literary meaning making by African American males.

The purpose of this research, then, was to explore the ways in which African American adolescent males construct identities through schooling. In this research I posed the following questions: How can two young adult novel units engage participants in exploring their identities? What do the voices and texts of participants suggest about the ways African American adolescent males construct their identities? What do the voices and texts of participants suggest about the ways African American adolescent males view schooling and formal literacy?

In the next chapter, I review relevant literature surrounding African American males in schooling. I also overview various ways in which schooling rituals and frameworks might impact the experiences African American males have with schooling. Finally, I provide a review of recent research on young adult literature, which forms the foundation for this research. In chapter 3, I give the details on methodology used for this project, as well as brief biographies of the participants who took part in this research. Chapter 4 relates the findings for this research, acquired through ethnographic methods and a variety of data gathering points. Finally, chapter 5 takes the findings presented in chapter 4 and illuminates them through pertinent literature surrounding this project, highlighting the significance and implications for both further research and practical applications for the classroom.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Part of my job description as a high school administrator involved conducting observations of our teachers. As I conducted countless observations throughout my administrative tenure, I do not recall the specific details of every one. But several remain in my memory—those that were extraordinary and left an indelible impression on my mind, and those that struck a nerve because certain groups of students were not genuinely engaged in schooling. It is the latter group of students on whom I wish to center my discussion here.

When I suggest that certain students were not truly engaged in schooling, I mean they encountered barriers they had to overcome within the classroom sphere—barriers that may not have presented themselves for the other students—and these barriers influenced the ways these students perceived their educational experiences. More specifically, these students, the African American males, were corrected when their words did not align with institutionally accepted forms of speech, were reprimanded when they crafted alternative forms of writing, artwork, or poetry that may not have directly addressed assessment rubrics; and were disciplined abruptly when other students may have been afforded more tolerance. And as an observer in these classrooms, I became privy to the ways that these environments affected the African American male students. I saw the looks of disappointment, the shame, the embarrassment that all accompanied an evident mismatch in cultural backdrops.

Several scholars have written about the difficulties African American males encounter in their classrooms, particularly with White female teachers and a curriculum grounded in middle-class norms and expectations (Delpit, 2006; Kunjufu, 1983, 1985). For example, Kunjufu (1983) states that "for White women it becomes very complex because their Black students may be the first Black males with whom they have ever had direct contact" (p. 12). With very little

experience with or knowledge of African American cultural styles and behaviors, many White female teachers often misinterpret the actions of these students, leading to escalating tensions, aggression, and, ultimately, removal of these students from the classroom (pp. 16-17). Similarly, Delpit (2006) discusses the disconnect that occurs when African American students, who have come to "expect an authority to act with authority," instead encounter a teacher who acts in the role of friend, hence indicating the teacher lacks authority and encouraging these students to act as such (p.35). Furthermore, as some researchers have pointed out, African American cultural codes sometimes conflict with accepted codes of conduct in schooling (Delpit, 2006; Kunjufu, 1983), resulting in disciplinary consequences for these students, who are deemed unruly for the classroom environment.

Such cultural incongruity can encourage African American males to view schooling as a source of conflict, as merely a pain they must endure, and as something incompatible with their identities. Simply put, when they do not see themselves in schooling, they begin to see themselves in opposition to schooling. As a result, they begin to construct their identities elsewhere—whether through sports, work, or the streets, drugs, or other illegal activities.

The relocation of male identities from schooling to elsewhere represents not only an unfortunate circumstance but an ironic one, as well. Historical accounts of early African American literacy do not abound with notions of African American males in conflict with schooling. An examination of African American literary activities in the 19th century reveals an abundance of literary societies and book clubs which had as their purpose exposing their members to the purpose of democracy in their communities and providing them a venue to "assert their racial and American identities" (McHenry, 2002, p. 20). Furthermore, acts of reading which were so significant a part of these societies, were viewed as "social and communal

models of exchange" (p. 102). Within this perspective of literacy, reading and the accompanying discussions and debates were also seen as beneficial for the common good, as these literary activities, it was assumed, would benefit both the individual and the community as a whole. Consequently, McHenry states, "Through these activities, the negative stereotypes associated with blacks would be replaced with images of industry, economy, and intellectual competence" (p. 100). As a whole, then, literacy in general and reading, more specifically, were viewed positively as avenues to active participation in civic life and betterment of individual and community. Furthermore, these early literary activities suggest that literacy was an important part of identity creation for African American males (Tatum, 2009).The point to be made here is that literacy has always existed as an integral part of African American communities.

However, the discourse of legitimacy surrounding dominant modes of schooling creates the illusion of a dichotomy between formal, institutionalized modes of schooling, and knowledge forms recognized and valued by many African American males. Historically, the literary societies to which I previously referred were created as "alternative sites of literacy, often as a challenge to those formal institutions that denied them access" (McHenry, p. 314). More contemporary alternative sites of literacy include churches, community centers, and neighborhoods. Once again, however, because these alternative literary sites still lack official sanction, as evidenced by present day schooling practices, many African American males are still made to feel as though the forms of literacy they value are not recognized, understood, or accepted.

Compounding these sentiments of inferiority are prevailing cultural stereotypes and assumptions about African American males that pervade the classroom. Hooks (2004) states, "Sadly, the real truth, which is taboo to speak, is that this is a culture that does not love black

males, that they are not loved by white men, white women, black women, or girls and boys. And that especially most black men do not love themselves" (p. xi). African American males are taught their roles in society from a very young age as the media works to indoctrinate them into the world of "patriarchal masculinity" (hooks, 2004). Media depicting African American males as savage brutes, as street thugs, and as inferior to white men, entices many African American males to adopt the street life where "real" men are violent predators, and where engaging in criminal acts earns one glory.

When one considers both the incongruity African American males encounter in the classrooms, along with societal stereotypes and assumptions concerning African American males, it is not difficult to realize that these compounding factors pose significant risks to the development of healthy masculine identities for these young men. Ironically, it is in this same venue of potential cultural conflict that African American males can also realize spaces of opportunity for positive identity constructions. Within the same spaces where these young men experience discouragement, they can also experience encouragement as they find connections between themselves and schooling.

Connections forged with texts offer a powerful avenue for encouraging African American males to engage in schooling. This is possible because the "exchange with the text can become for the reader a process of self-creation" (Probst, 56). Reading and engaging with texts becomes a source of meaning creation, as the reader interacts with the text to create new meanings, each reading bringing about new understandings (Sumara, 2002). As a site of potential identity formation, reading texts "culminates in a sharpened, heightened sense of self" because "some part of the reader's conception of the world is confirmed, modified, or refuted, and that changes the reader" (Probst, p. 56). In short, engaging in the act of reading has the potential to positively

influence the identities of African American males and create spaces for connecting them with schooling.

Suggesting that reading literature can be empowering for African American males, Tatum (2009) states, "Engaging these young males in reading and writing texts that pay attention to their multiple identities…becomes a bridge to opportunities" (p. 14). Books that build so-called "textual lineages" are important because they build upon students' experiences and bridge the gap between their personal lives and their literate lives (Tatum, 2009). In this way, reading could offer classroom possibilities for African American males to explore their identities and shape their lives through powerful experiences via literature. And such experiences could help reestablish the positive role of literacy in their lives.

In this next section, I establish the sociocultural view of literacy I find helpful in exploring the role of literacy in the lives of African American males. I then briefly discuss the frameworks of power within which formal notions of literacy function in schooling. Finally, I conclude with exploring the roles that reader response and young adult literature might play in exploring African American male identities and their experiences in schooling.

Literacies

Literacy has long been viewed as a primary goal of education, but the meaning of the term has evolved over time to encompass more than simply the ability to read and write (Gee, 2008; Schachter & Galili-Schachter, 2012). Furthermore, because of the recognition of multiple contexts in which literacy is developed and practiced, as well as sociocultural forces that legitimize and recognize various forms of literacy, discussions of literacy now typically surround "literacies" instead (Gee, 2008). Understanding literacy in this context generates a more multidimensional view of literacy and a broader acceptance of what constitutes literacy.

Using approaches to literacy advocated by New Literacy Studies theorists, such as Gee (1989, 2008) and Street (2003), any definition of literacy must consider "the social and ideological contexts that give literacy meaning" (Schachter & Galili-Schachter, p. 5). In other words, different groups of individuals recognize various forms of literacy in various situations at various moments in time. As such, literacy cannot be considered a stagnant entity, easily defined, and readily determined, nor can it be separated from historical or social contexts (Gee, 2008).

Given a broader understanding of "literacies," the notion of a student being considered literate in reading becomes much more complex than merely the mastery of skills required for reading and decoding text. In the cultural sense, different contexts require the possession of different information, and members of a culture assume those people to whom they communicate already possess the prior knowledge required to understand those communications (Schachter & Galili-Schachter, 2012). If, as Hirsch (1987) claimed, students must possess certain background knowledge relative to a text before they are able to fully comprehend the text, then being literate becomes relative to the particular text students are reading, since members of the cultural group are assumed to have acquired pertinent knowledge for deciphering meaning. In other words, different kinds of texts require the reader to possess certain prior knowledge and skills, and people learn to read and understand these texts by belonging to certain groups where individuals read texts in certain ways (Gee, 2008). In this regard, Gee (2008) states, "Thus, one does not learn to read texts of type X in way Y unless one has had experience in settings where texts of type X are read in way Y" (p. 44). Furthermore, it is important to note that "there are many different levels of meaning one can give to or take from any text, many different ways in which any text can be read" (p. 43). Viewing literacy in this way defines literacy more complexly as a social practice to be acquired through interactions with various social groups rather than simply a

commodity to possess or a skill to acquire. As a result, multiple forms of literacy are acknowledged, not merely official, institutionally sanctioned forms.

Unfortunately, however, this sociocultural view of literacy does not dominate the discourse regarding African American males and their achievements in schooling. Rather than articulating the school experiences of these students in connection with their unique cultural backgrounds or acknowledging the alternative discourses from which their experiences might emanate, the narratives surrounding African American males in schooling are often steeped in depictions of failure. While the situation African American males encounter is inarguably in urgent need of solutions, the conversations surrounding these young men often center upon the failings themselves and, perhaps more compellingly, place the blame for such failings squarely on their shoulders. Citing this trend for blaming marginalized students for their struggles, Fine (1991) states, "Their bodies are not represented as the *products* of urban decay, but are framed instead as the *causes* of crumbling urban economies, crime, inadequate housing, unemployment, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and racial/ class discrimination" (p.229, emphasis in original).

In current discourses, African American males are labeled "at risk," "unsalvageable," and "bound for jail" (Ferguson, 2001); facing a "dire situation" (Eckholm, 2006); considered victims of a conspiracy (Kunjufu, 1985); living in "peril" (The Council of the Great City Schools, 2010); in a state of "crisis" and portrayed as being "more body than mind," even "appearing to be slow" (hooks, 2004). By contrast, African American males who do not merit these designations are often labeled as having "beat the odds" (The Council of the Great City Schools, 2010), suggesting that their achievements are somehow anomalies. Mainstream media, too, assist in perpetuating these "young black male crisis narratives" (Brown & Donnor, 2011), often giving more coverage to negative depictions of African American males. Television coverage often

perpetuates the notion that "black males are most often the bad guys, and whether bad or good, they are the guys who die young" (hooks, 2004). Citing this propensity, Thomas (2012) states

> By too often featuring stories of violent young black men, they [media] appear to promote the very racial stereotypes they deplore. Why don't we see more stories about young men making right choices, staying in school, rejecting drugs, and getting married before having children? They exist. Can't the media find them? (Thomas, 2012).

As a result, many African American males, "victimized by stereotypes" (hooks, p. xii), face difficulties against prevailing expectations of irresoluble failure, established assumptions of deviance, and unique cultural markers deemed incongruous with dominant, mainstream, middle-class educational ideals.

Such portrayals influence not only how society at large views African American males but, ultimately, how school systems view African American males. The struggle to compensate for entrenched institutional stereotypes and assumptions regarding African American males becomes a burden many of these students carry from the first day of school. Regarding these stereotypes, Tatum and Muhammad (2012) state, "These descriptors have placed Black male youth under surveillance for academic difficulties from the time they enter school until they exit" (p. 456). Such hyper-surveillance has spawned disproportionate rates of discipline and special education placement for African American males. (Ferguson, 2000) In this next section, I explain more thoroughly the workings of labels, surveillance, and disproportionality as they relate to African American males in school.

The Hidden Curriculum

Apple (2004) provides insight into the inner workings of the hidden curriculum operating through schooling. The notion of the hidden curriculum, "the tacit teaching of social and economic norms and expectations to students in schools" (p. 42), resides beneath the surface of a seemingly objective selection of curriculum materials, ensuring that the selection of what is

taught in schools, what is considered official school knowledge, actually serves to reify and legitimate certain cultural and historical societal values. In this regard, Apple (2004) states, "The very fact that certain traditions and normative 'content' *are* construed as school knowledge is prima facie evidence of their perceived legitimacy" (p. 43, emphasis in original). Given the legitimacy and power associated with knowledge circulating through schooling, educational institutions, then, help to reinforce cultural capital of the dominant class through the teaching of hegemonic values and norms, particularly those associated with white, middle-class individuals. In other words, what is typically taught in schools is often reflective of dominant cultural norms, and what is taught in schools, because it is taught in schools, is infused with an assumed authority. If the hidden curriculum ensures that educational institutions are indeed reflective of hegemonic norms and value knowledge associated with those who dominate, then it follows that the hidden curriculum also serves to "maintain the ideological hegemony of the most powerful classes in this society" (p. 41). Put simply, the hidden curriculum functions in schools to make the values and norms of the dominant class the standards against which all students are evaluated. Furthermore, these standards are made to appear natural, acceptable, and attainable, and those students who do not perform in accordance with these standards are deemed deviant.

Power operating within the hidden curriculum serves to create the illusion that deviance is merely another objective category under which students can be classified and grouped. Deviance is recognized under the hidden curriculum through the use of labels, which represent the invisible nature of power manifesting itself in the educational realm through discourse. Foucault (1990) saw discourse as power, working to create the illusion that the labels, assumptions, and exclusionary practices employed in education are completely natural. Such

discourse comes to identify "how particular social and cultural practices and identity markers come to be entangled with being a good student (or not)" (Youdell, 2006, p. 34).

Essentially any individual operating outside the boundaries of what is defined as "normal," incurs the risk of being labeled by the insiders and experts of the institution. In education, this labeling practice manifests itself through the use of terms used to sort and classify students—terms such as "at-risk," "special ed," "504," "gifted," "troublemaker," etc. Apple (2004) cites several reasons for concern with such labeling practices. These labels and categories appear to represent objective realities rather than "social constructs" (p. 126). In other words, these labels themselves appear to represent an objective, finite, ultimate reality when, in fact, they do not really equal "the things" themselves at all. Rather, these labels are "categories that developed out of specific social and historical situations which conform to a specific framework of assumptions and institutions" (p. 127), and they represent ways in which schools normalize and categorize African American males (Ferguson, 2000). As such, labels can be harmful to students when educators do not take into account the social and historical situatedness of such identifiers and, furthermore, understand the notion of power inherent in the group that applies these labels on other groups (p. 126).

The labeling process marginalizes African American male students. In the process of labeling a student, the educator essentially places all blame and burden for the remediation of the problem squarely on the individual student. In being labeled, students at once become viewed as existing outside the boundaries of "normal," and others within the institution begin to view them as individuals in need of assistance, disregarding "the social inequalities that set them up to fail or […] the possible cultural bias of standardized tests" (Boler, 1999, p. 47). As Scott (n.d., as cited in Apple, 2004) states, "Perhaps the most important fact about this reaction in our society is

that almost all of the steps that are taken are *directed solely at the deviant*" (p. 127, emphasis in original). In other words, individuals operating outside institutional norms, often unaware of understood codes necessary for navigating institutional frameworks, are labeled and then burdened with providing their own remediation. Scott further states:

> If an educator may define another as a 'slow learner,' a 'discipline problem,' or other general category, he or she may prescribe general 'treatments' that are seemingly neutral and helpful. However, by the very fact that the categories themselves are based upon institutionally defined abstractions, the educator is freed from the more difficult task of examining the institutional and economic context that caused these abstract labels to be placed upon a concrete individual in the first place (p. 127).

Nowhere within the dialogue does discussion exist about influences and inadequacies of society or the institution itself, both of which indeed may be factors in these students' identified deficiencies.

In addition to saddling the individual with the task of remediating himself or herself, such labeling practices also assume an official, scientific aura, thereby creating the illusion of authoritative and quantitative exactness behind the individual's label and leaving little dispute as to the legitimacy of the marker. In participating in this practice, "curriculum researchers may be lending the rhetorical prestige of science to what may be questionable practices of an educational bureaucracy…" (Douglas, 1971, as cited in Apple, 2004, p. 127). Under the auspices of science and authority, these labels ostensibly function to identify and then provide remediation to those individuals needing assistance. However, a closer examination suggests the insidious workings of these markers, as they "confer an inferior status in those so labeled…such labels are not neutral" (p. 128). Not only do the labels come to identify and define individuals, they also come to regulate how the individuals interact with others, how others perceive the individuals, and how the individuals perceive themselves.

The labeling process presents a particular challenge for African American males because "children with 'nonmodal' socio-cultural backgrounds and of minority groups predominate to a disproportionate degree in being so labeled" (Apple, 2004, p. 129). And since diagnostic tests were developed under the framework of traditional white, European ideals, the language and culture of African American males often function outside these norms, resulting in disproportionate labeling of these students (p. 129). Furthermore, the labels carry a permanent branding, as the markers often follow the students to future schools and other societal institutions throughout life (p. 130).

Surveillance: Sorting, Regulating, Classifying

Labeling can be achieved in the school system through the hidden curriculum, which functions to classify students through the regulation and surveillance of behavior. Since most schools consider following the rules paramount to orderly instruction, there is often little consideration given to the impacts of these policies on various ethnic groups, and little tolerance is provided for those who do not abide by these rules. In fact, because rules are generally viewed as neutral and necessary for proper instruction, "the question of how order is obtained, at whose expense, the messages this 'order' bears, and the role that it plays in the regulation and production of social identities is rarely addressed" (Ferguson, 2000, p. 52). The continued lack of critical reflection on such school policies and the blind acceptance of these policies serve to further legitimate marginalizing practices, bolstering the perception that the students possess the deficiencies, and it is their burden to remediate themselves to succeed within a framework of seemingly neutral rules and discipline policies.

Rather than view discipline in schools as neutral and impartial, Foucault offers a different analysis of the functions of discipline, and his perspectives offer an opportunity to examine the

interaction of African American males with disciplinary structures existing in schooling. When examined through a Foucauldian lens, the seemingly neutral policies purportedly enacted to maintain order and discipline are, in fact, covert avenues through which African American males are labeled and channeled out of the school system. Impartial, objective policies they may seem, yet their application provides an alternate space for the biases and prejudices of those who apply the rules—those with the disciplinary power. Such power functions through surveillance and other methods of regulation of individuals.

Disciplinary power, according to Foucault (1995), operates invisibly to exert control over its subjects, who are always watched. This form of power, along with the labeling practices previously mentioned, is yet another challenge African American males face in schooling. Disciplinary practices in schools operate by ensuring that "it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being always able to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his [sic] subjection" (p. 187). Impressing upon these students the perpetual feeling of being watched helps to ensure that they remain ever vigilant and ever reminded of institutional policies and existing societal frameworks.

This power dynamic to which I refer is neither simplistic nor easy to identify in some singularity. Rather, its complex, multidimensional workings make it complicated. Once again, for Foucault, power does not reside in one singular entity but, rather, should be seen as a force that is "employed and exercised through a net-like organization in which individuals can be subjected to the effects of power and act as vehicles for its articulation" (Siu-ming, 2006, p. 781). In other words, individuals cannot pinpoint a single location of power and enact resistance upon it. As such, Foucault's conception of power envisions a complex system of forces imposing

power on one another. Rather than a notion of power that is one-sided, dominated solely by those holding supreme power over the others, Foucault's power is not only hierarchical but also multifaceted, like "a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised" (as cited in Levitt, 2008, p. 49). As a co-creator of power, then, the individual "inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, 1995, pp. 202-203). With power existing as a multidimensional entity, then, individuals possess the power for resistance and agency but, in participating in the power dynamics, also take part in their own regulation.

More specifically, in education, students themselves perpetuate power systems by "enforcing norms on each other" (Thomas, 2008, p. 160). In this light, acts of resistance become conceptualized as complicated undertakings; the dynamics of power are complex, and individuals themselves become co-creators of this power. Viewed in this light, African American males, therefore, are not to be perceived as passive recipients of authorities' power but as actors themselves in these power plays.

Such power plays often revolve around established norms and society's desire to uphold these norms (Foucault, 1990). *The History of Sexuality* (1990) illuminates Foucault's ideas that science produced a kind of "official" knowledge and an accompanying discourse which was utilized to judge an individual's conformity to society's norms. It is this official discourse with which I am concerned regarding African-American males. As I have stated previously, disproportionality in referral rates for African-American males may be explained by a process of labeling these students by school officials who perceive these students as "not fitting into the norm of the school" (Casella, 2003, as cited in Fenning & Rose, 2007, p. 537). Foucault

recognized the tendency of individuals to "discipline themselves or others around them to fit within these norms; failure to be normalized has often justified interventions" (Thomas, 2008, p. 154). As such, these students are targeted for their failure to adhere to these norms.

To encourage students to conform to established norms, forces inherent in institutional power encourage individuals to regulate themselves. Foucault's theories of "governmentality" concern this complex, multi-dimensional view of power working through institutions and are useful in examining how institutions instill self-discipline in their subjects. According to Foucault, government does not operate solely in its official capacity but also reaches into other dimensions of individuals' lives, such as educational and personal spaces. Through its influences, power produces certain knowledge forms and discourses that individuals internalize, leading individuals to regulate themselves. In the end, individuals begin to govern themselves from the inside, resulting in less demand for outside surveillance and producing a more efficient mode of governing (Foucault, 1991). According to Raby and Domitrek (2007), "Individuals even come to invest, and find pleasure in, their self-discipline" (p. 933).

In her work *Feeling Power: Emotions and education*, Boler (1999) references this same conception of power, terming it "pastoral power." She states, "Within Western democratic and capitalist patriarchies, individuals are policed and disciplined through modes of internalized control…With respect to education, *pastoral power* describes modern methods of maintaining discipline and control" (p. 21, emphasis in original). The methods through which this mechanism operates include instilling within individuals the fear of being watched and the ability to self-police, enlisting others to regulate each other, and establishing norms and hierarchies to which individuals must adhere (p. 22). This self-regulating serves a practical, utilitarian purpose for

schools because "to teach young people to police themselves is more cost-efficient than outfitting an urban school with police and safety monitors" (p. 86).

It is important to note here, as well, that it is not only the students who participate in this web of power; teachers and administrators themselves also partake in this interplay. Johnson (2006), in "The Editorial *We*: Discussing teaching concepts," applies Foucault's Panopticon and his theories of surveillance to better understand the ways in which teachers are regulated, particularly since the advent of high-stakes testing. She states, "For K-12 teachers, the Panopticon can take the form of administrators, high-stakes assessments, and other purveyors of this era of accountability" (p. 161). Likewise, administrators themselves are continually watched to be sure that they uphold institutional norms.

The ultimate depiction of this perpetual state of hyper-vigilance is epitomized by the Panopticon, a prison design created by Jeremy Bentham and described in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995). The invisible nature of power inherent in the prison's design enabled the constant surveillance and supervision of inmates. The arrangement of cells toward the outside of the building with a central tower in the middle, combined with backlighting from the windows, enabled supervisors to observe each cell without the inmates being aware of the observation. Therefore, the underlying purpose of the Panopticon was "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (p. 201). Foucault posits that the design and organization of the spaces, the partitioning of the inmates into assigned places, the arrangement and designation of time, and the "control of activity" all function to facilitate discipline and disciplinary power (p. 149).

I mention these descriptive details because a closer examination of them suggests a parallel between these prison designs and practices and those typical of schools. In fact, several

scholars have written about the similarities between schools and prison systems (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Ferguson, 2000; Simmons, 2005; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Going a step further, school and prison studies, as a discipline, attempts to examine the ways in which certain practices inherent in schooling potentially lead to incarceration. Within this discipline, the concept of "the school-to-prison pipeline" is "organized around a linear construct that places schools and prisons at either end and then theorizes the movement along that trajectory" (Simmons, 2005, p. 5). In other words, "the school-to-prison pipeline" concept theorizes that there exist elements of the educational system that actually perpetuate the movement of certain individuals from school into the prison system. Simmons (2005), however, argues that the binary proposed under traditional "school-to-prison" studies actually functions differently. Rather than the prison and the school existing on different ends of a continuum, she suggests the existence of a "prison school," where disciplinary actions resembling prisons are already embedded within school discipline practices. In this light, given such parallels, many schools function to actually encourage the expulsion of African American males out of the school and, eventually, into the prison system.

Disproportionality

Research on the school-to-prison pipeline suggests various methods through which schools use their discipline policies to "push poor students of color out of school through the use of suspension and expulsion" (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Disproportionality—the disproportionate incidence of suspensions for African-American students and the higher numbers of African-American students in special education services, vocational and technical classes, and suspensions— is one way in which African-American students are limited in their access to schooling. As support for this trend, numerous studies document the overrepresentation of

African-American males in school suspensions and expulsions. Taylor and Foster (1986) suggest the existence of a covert operation designed to "eliminate black males from an effective education and prevent them from competing successfully in this society" (p. 505). Suspensions, according to the authors, encourage students with problems to leave school rather than remain and solve their problems, further creating challenges for them.

In another example, Nelson, Gonzales, Epstein, and Benner (2003) found race to be a major factor in school discipline, as well. In fact, their findings revealed that African-American students received twice as many discipline referrals as their white counterparts. Hinojosa (2008) confirmed these findings in her study on suspension rates for African-American students. Her study revealed a suspension rate of 4:1 for African-American students compared to rates for white students. The author implies that teacher expectations may influence suspension rates for students. Furthermore, various scholars have written about lower expectations for African American males in schools, as well as negative labeling and stereotyping for these students (Kunjufu, 1986; Mahiri, 1997; Ferguson, 2000; Delpit, 2006). Ultimately, these lower expectations and disproportionate rates of suspensions discourage African American males from remaining in school. Unfortunately, "…the *bodies* of some are exported out prior to graduation. These bodies are disproportionately bodies of color and of low-income students" (Fine, 1991, p. 25, emphasis in original).

As I have stated previously, these prevailing perspectives and assumptions about African American males permeate not only the broader landscape of society but also schooling more specifically. Unfortunately, for these young men, imbedded conceptions of African American males pervade the classroom, as well, impacting teacher expectations, student-teacher relations, and acceptance and tolerance for behaviors considered outside the mainstream school culture. In

the next section, I discuss more in-depth the challenges many African American males encounter in their classrooms.

The Classroom Culture and What Counts as Literacy

Authors Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000) suggest that "those children seen as cognitively deficient in school-based literacies might be fully literate in community (or social) and personal (or political) literacies, which were 'illegal' in school curricula" (p. 4). In other words, students who appear to lack mastery of official, sanctioned forms of literacy taught in schools actually might be proficient in alternative, unrecognized forms of literacy—perhaps forms unrecognized in schooling but considered integral parts of their own cultures. It is this chasm between official school literacies and alternate forms of literacy that become sources of potential conflict for African American males in schooling.

To make better sense of these conflicting discourses, I find it helpful to consider Gallego and Hollingsworth's (2000) categories of "school literacies," "community literacies," and "personal literacies." These different categorizations of literacy suggest that individuals "may be "legitimately literate" in literacies "apart from the standard form of literacy taught in school" (p. 137). Similarly, Gee (2008) views literacy as connected with different "Discourses," socially situated identities, which determine norms and establish expectations for behaviors (p. 4). Such a conception of literacy might, for instance, provide insight into which forms of literacy are valued by African American males and how these young men might better connect with schooling.

School Literacies

Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000) define "school literacies" as "the learning of interpretive and communicative processes needed to adapt socially to school and other dominant

language contexts, and the use or practice of those processes in order to gain a conceptual understanding of school subjects (p. 25). In this sense, then, school literacies are those forms of knowledge that enable individuals to successfully operate within the framework of schooling. This may entail background knowledge and experiences analogous to those involved within school curriculum, an understanding of implicit modes of acceptable behavior, and an acceptance of dominant notions of authority, including what authority figures deem proper codes of conduct. Ultimately, in the classroom, students possessing school literacies know what types of student behaviors their teachers like, which kinds of answers their teachers adore, and how to work themselves into favor with their teachers.[5]

In addition to sanctioning certain literacies, formal schooling favors individuals holding membership in particular classes of society—namely the middle class. Specifically accomplished through the tracking of certain students into lower-level academic class offerings and the discouraging of literacies not sanctioned by the middle class, schools help perpetuate an environment dominated by middle-class ideologies and reward those students operating by middle-class norms. Several scholars have written about the role of schooling in mirroring societal class divisions. Fine (1991) in *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*, explores through critical ethnography the ways in which schools participate in social reproduction. School practices, such as the discouragement of conversation in lower-level classes, the emphasis on teacher control, and the rewarding of students speaking the officially sanctioned language, contribute to the funneling of students of lower classes into lower tracks or encouraging them to drop out. The author states, "The ease with which *most* of these students were accorded educational outcomes likely to guarantee them poverty and

[5] See also Shirley Brice Heath's work *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms* (1983), which details insights from an ethnographic study concerning how children learn to use language at home and at school.

unemployment, enacted by well-intentioned educators, offers sobering evidence of the smooth functioning of public education as a system of injustice" (p. 100). Willis (1977) likewise details through ethnography how schooling funnels working class students toward working class jobs, underscoring its role in social reproduction. Willis states, "It is the school which has built up a certain resistance to mental work and an inclination towards manual work. Resistance to mental work becomes resistance to authority as learnt in school" (p. 103). The significance of these perspectives for African American males is that these students are more likely to live in poverty, entering school as members of a class whose language, behaviors, and culture are not likely appreciated or rewarded by the system of formal schooling.

As I have stated previously, African American males enter school bearing the weight of a race and gender that is disproportionately disciplined, suspended, expelled, and placed in special education and remedial classes—a situation suggesting the possibility of a cultural disconnect between African American males and the largely white and middle class culture that dominates most schools. Kunjufu (1986) references this problem, stating that "large numbers of Black boys have been suspended because they refused to say yes or no ma'am or sir, apologize, take off their hats, alter their walk, talk softer, smile, or change their body language" (p. 29). Going beyond the establishment of a cultural disconnect in schools, Kunjufu (1986) suggests the existence of a conspiracy to "destroy Black boys before they become men" (p. v). Finally, in keeping with this idea, several scholars view African American males as an "endangered species" due to certain cultural norms and values inherent in the social, political, and economic institutions of the U.S. (Gibbs, 1988; Hare, 1987; Jordan & Cooper, 2003). One of these institutions—the school—takes on a significant role in perpetuating these values.

As major players in schooling institutions, teachers inherently play important roles in transmitting and ensuring the continuation of hegemonic values. Thomas (2008) asserts that "educators are the surveyors, the normalizers" (p. 171). What he refers to here is the awesome power inherent in teachers' positions—what Stephen Ball (as cited in Thomas, 2008, p. 156) considers as the power to act as "frontline classifiers" and "directors of who students become." Seeing teachers in this light illuminates another significant problem for African American males—the predominance of White female teachers who have limited knowledge and experience with African American male culture. Kunjufu (1986) states, "For White women it becomes very complex because their Black students may be the first Black males with whom they have ever had direct contact" (p.12). In fact, many educators lack knowledge about their students' cultural differences and are limited in their abilities to appropriately educate students from diverse backgrounds (Williams, 2006, p. 348). According to Williams (2006), because language and culture play such an important role in African American identity, many students experience a significant conflict between the language and culture of their own community and the language and culture typical of most classroom settings, which likely mirror mainstream White culture (p. 347). In this regard, Delpit (2008) states, "Schools often see themselves, and are seen by the larger society, as the arbiters of what is proper, correct, and decent. African American language forms have been considered none of the above" (p. xx).

Given such cultural differences, African American males are often aware of how this cultural difference functions for them in the school system, and they constantly work to negotiate this divide. Unfortunately, when teachers fail to incorporate lessons that address multiple cultures, these students often "do not make connections, become unmotivated, and do not identify with the teacher" (Jackson, 2005, p. 204). Smith (2002) states, "The difference between

the culture that African-American students bring to school and the standard culture of the school poses a problem for them" (p. 28). The cultural divide can manifest itself in classroom misbehavior and poor academic performance. African American cultural styles, which value communal activities, often conflict with the ideals that White teachers esteem in the operations of their classrooms. The result is that many African American students become bored and unstimulated. Further compounding this mismatch is the tendency for white teachers to misinterpret African American students' various behavioral styles as outright defiance, which further reinforces both lower expectations and higher incidences of disciplinary consequences (Downey & Pribesh, 2004, p. 268).

Cultural differences are also to blame for many African American students doubting their own abilities in the classroom and ultimately becoming underachievers. The problem with cultural divides for African American male students is that the differences between their culture and mainstream school culture instill in them feelings of inferiority and anxiety, leading to underachievement and low performance. The cycle continues as the classroom teacher begins to associate such underachievement with Black males, thus lowering expectations for these students. Students, in turn, begin to doubt their own abilities (Jackson, 2005; Williams, 2006; White- Clark, 2005). Such experiences undoubtedly influence the formation of students' identities.

In the area of teacher expectations, Smith (2002) asserts that certain assumptions and stereotypes may influence the way teachers instruct their African-American students. The work of several scholars suggests that many White teachers do not possess the cultural sensitivity needed to educate African American males. For instance, Pang and Sablan's (1998) study about teacher confidence in teaching African American students yielded a low proportion of

respondents feeling adequately prepared to teach African American students. Ogbu's (1987) work also supports the claim that teachers and administrators lower their expectations for minority students. He further asserts that school personnel contribute to these lowered expectations by shuttling minority students into special education programs and labeling them as having educational deficiencies (p. 319).The potentially harmful effect for the African-American student is that such prevailing notions may result in lower expectations and lower academic achievement.

For African American males, the problem with such cultural incompatibility is that it dominates their entire schooling experience. As members of a culture typically preferring language styles, appearances, and learning styles directly contrasting educational philosophies of the white, middle-class, African American males face intense struggles to operate in an educational environment that values and reinforces cultural styles opposite their own, and this gap in understanding can cause difficulties for these students. Hooks (2004) states, "Time and time again when telling their life stories, black males describe being punished in schools for daring to think and question" (p. 36).When faced with teachers who neither understand nor appreciate their heritage, who discipline them rather than seek to understand them, who do not find a place in their curriculum for them, who single them out because of racial assumptions, and who cannot identify with them because of gender and ethnic barriers, African American males can find schools to be rather isolating spaces.

Examining White Subjectivities

A potential starting point for examining classroom practices and their impacts on African American males might include teacher introspection regarding their own possible roles in perpetuating classroom cultures not supportive of the optimal academic, social, and emotional

development of these young men. More specifically, recent statistics reporting that 83% of public school teachers are white and 76% public school teachers are female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), necessitates examining the impacts of this trend on schooling experiences of African American males.

In this regard, viewing the role of White female teachers through a critical white studies lens is helpful for better understanding their inherent positions in the power dynamics of schooling (Case, 2012; McIntosh, 1990, 2012). Case (2012) states, "As a fundamental goal, both critical race theory and critical white studies expose the race-neutral charades and myths that perpetuate racial oppression" (p. 79). Such a perspective suggests that, as members of the White race, White female teachers are naturally positioned to receive privileges afforded to those of the White race, certain entitlements often taken for granted by Whites and not afforded to members of marginalized groups. In fact, McIntosh (1988) views such entitlements as "an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I am meant to remain oblivious" (p. 1). Specifically regarding White teachers, then, by the very nature of having been born white, White teachers automatically earn membership in a group that holds power. The very color of their white skin equates power, yet many members of the group remain oblivious to the nature of such power, its significance, and its potential consequences for other individuals who may not possess such cultural capital.

Making such invisible whiteness more recognized and its implications understood may encourage greater awareness among White teachers as to the impacts of racism on African American male students. Case (2012) states:

> For White women involved in active self-reflection on racism, understanding white privilege and the normalization of whiteness may advance the process of anti-racist identity development. White women can begin to view the world through a filter of

> race that no longer hides whiteness, but rather highlights white privilege and the centrality of whiteness (p. 79).

An examination of White teachers' own subjectivities and "unearned advantages" might raise awareness of these teachers' roles in perpetuating racism and encourage them to take action to create better classroom communities (p. 79).

Such introspection may be best undertaken with an understanding of the complex workings of privilege, better viewed not as a singular entity but rather as a multidimensional, complicated network of power relations built upon individuals' memberships in not one but a multitude of groups. McIntosh (2012) encourages this more complex view of privilege, stating, "Nobody is only privileged or only disadvantaged. Different types of privilege and disadvantage can add to, subtract from, multiply, or divide one's chances for a decent life" (p. 196). Put simply, understanding power dynamics from a more complex perspective requires recognizing students' memberships in more than one group and understanding the implications of those memberships. For example, Blumenfeld and Jaekel (2012) examined Christianity as one such group, providing an example of complex power relations through their study with preservice teachers and awareness of Christian privilege. Results of the study revealed participants' unwillingness to self-assess or reflect on the privileges they received as members of Christianity, in addition to participants' lack of desire to investigate the impacts of power relations between Christian groups and more marginalized groups (p. 142). The authors suggest that, similar to the ways in which whites benefit as members of the White race, so, too, do Christians benefit from their membership in Christianity, regardless of whether such rewards are recognized or sought. This more complex perspective of privilege is important for teachers because, in recognizing the many factors that determine privilege, such as social class, gender, income, etc., teachers can better understand privilege and social standing as emanating not merely from a student's

membership in a particular ethnic group but rather through a complex web of memberships in a diverse range of interwoven relationships. Just as important, however, is an understanding by teachers of their own roles in perpetuating racism, even if unintentionally as members of a dominant group, and an interest in creating a classroom culture built upon such understandings.

James Joseph Scherich's (2002) text *Anti-racist scholarship: An advocacy* provides an excellent lens through which to critique classroom practice and locate possibilities for change within the classroom walls. As I have previously mentioned, African American males often struggle with the overwhelmingly white, middle-class, female teacher presence in their classrooms. As members of the white race, many of these teachers represent individuals who, according to Scheurich (2002), perpetuate racism, whether intentional or not, through their use of stereotypes, their reifying of stereotypical representations of African Americans, and their avoidance of dialogue concerning racism (pp. 3-4). Further complicating this issue and limiting dialogue is the fact that many white individuals do not perceive themselves as racist people. In this regard, Scheurich states:

> The way, though, that white racism works for us white people, including educators and researchers, is that we can deeply and comfortably believe that we are (mostly) a good, ethical, fair, upstanding people—certainly not racists, while, at the same time, we hide white racism and its consequences from our direct, central consciousness (p. 4).

According to Scheurich (2002), white people are not only guilty of avoiding dialogue about racism, but they tend toward defensiveness and resistance when presented with the conversation. Scheurich states, "The fascinating fact is that we ignore a whole pattern of evidence that is repeatedly and literally right BEFORE OUR EYES" (p. 4, emphasis in original). This "evidence" to which Scheurich refers includes discrimination existing in job patterns, housing, law, and education (pp. 6-7). Focusing directly on the "education" strand of this assertion, as I have previously mentioned, discrimination in education manifests itself in the

disproportionate placement of African Americans in lower level classes and a higher number of suspensions and other disciplinary consequences for this group of students. As a result of white resistance to dialogue and the disproportionate treatment of African Americans in educational spaces, the dominant trend in schooling is to blame the African American students themselves (Ferguson, 2000; Ladson- Billings, 1994; Scheurich, 2002; White-Clark, 2005).

What Scheurich recommends is acceptance by white people that "we all are always already within and of white racism" (p. 8). Racism, according to Scheurich, is inescapable because, by the very nature of one's whiteness, one enjoys various freedoms and privileges not extended to people of color. As such, this racism cannot be overcome merely by choosing one side or by removing oneself from the tension (p. 8). Instead, beginning with acceptance and continuing with openness to dialogue, Scheurich urges white scholars to recognize their role in perpetuating racism and then work arduously toward an anti-racist scholarship. It is noteworthy to point out here that Scheurich advocates such research be undertaken *with* scholars of color—not solely *by* white scholars *about* people of color (pp. 10-11).

The collaboration, the dialogue, and the willingness to examine commonly-held assumptions form the basis of what Scheurich recommends for addressing racism in our schools. As Miguel Guajardo (as cited in Scheurich, 2002, p. 231) states, "The answer is not in the good intentions, it is in the critical discourse that must take place for change to happen."

In addition to Scheurich, other scholars also offer opportunities for examining spaces for positive change. For example, Rabinow (as cited in Mayo, 2000) suggests that what is needed in education is "not a means of making everyone the same, but of creating new modes of being together" (p. 110). In this light, I assert once again that the possibilities for change may be found in the classroom, more specifically, in pedagogy steeped in cultural responsiveness.

To account for cultural differences between teacher and student, as well as to motivate these students to engage in learning, several scholars advocate a multicultural classroom that nurtures learning while celebrating the unique African-American culture (Jackson, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; White-Clark, 2005; Williams, 2006). Such an approach helps to bridge the cultural disparities between home and school as a way to facilitate learning (Williams, 2006, p. 347).

To achieve the multicultural classroom space, Ladson-Billings (1994), in *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*, recommends a pedagogy grounded in cultural relevance. The culturally relevant classroom strikes a balance between the maintenance of students' unique cultures and the safeguarding of these cultures upon their interaction with the dominant culture. Ladson-Billings (1994) states, "The primary aim of culturally relevant teaching is to assist in the development of a 'relevant black personality' that allows African American students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture" (p. 17). She cautions that such teaching is not "a series of steps…or a recipe" (p. 26) but a different perspective, an altered way of viewing African American students. Such teachers come to view their teaching as "an art rather than as a technical skill" and genuinely believe that their students can be successful, rather than harbor the assumption that some are inherently doomed to failure (p. 25).

In this regard, teachers, by the very nature of their authoritative positioning, bear significant responsibility in inviting and encouraging the celebration of difference in their classrooms. As I have previously stated, Thomas (2008) and Stephen Ball (as cited in Thomas, 2008, p. 156) cite the power of teachers to act as "frontline classifiers" and "directors of who students become," referring to the awesome power inherent in teachers' positions. Rather than

utilize this power to further reify society's norms and established hierarchies in the classroom, teachers should instead view the scenes in their classrooms as opportunities for change. Students should be encouraged to criticize, as "criticism creates avenues for transformation by problematizing" (Thomas, 2008, p. 167). I return once again to Foucault, who perceived criticism to be a cornerstone for change, a questioning of that which is assumed. Foucault wrote, "Criticism consists in uncovering that thought and trying to change it: showing that things are not as obvious as people believe, making it so that what is taken for granted is no longer taken for granted…Transformation becomes at the same time very urgent" (as cited in Thomas, 2008, p. 167). Using criticism as a grounds for change, teachers can encourage students to embrace differences, learn how to problematize, say that which they may not have said, and appreciate those moments when they are made to feel somewhat uncomfortable in the classroom—learning takes place in these venues (p. 173). In this sense, "school literacies" can actually become a platform for building connections between students' unique cultures and creating new forms of knowledge, as well.

Young Adult Literature

A possible space for building these connections and creating new knowledge resides in young adult literature. Because young adult novels depict issues that are familiar to young readers, "young adult novels provide a roadmap of sorts for adolescents coping with these issue in real life" (Bean & Moni, 2003). Young adult literature is also useful for "engaging struggling and/or reluctant readers" (Allen, 1995) and has been shown to increase motivation to read (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). In this regard, Bach, Choate, and Parker (2011) state, "One of the reasons YAL is so popular and important to students is that they can often relate to the experiences of its characters" (p. 199). Young adult literature can also be used to "teach for social justice" (Wolk,

2009). Furthermore, young adult novels offer opportunities for students to think about their developing identities and their places in the world (Bean & Harper, 2006). Such novels can be used in conjunction with reader response to create opportunities for young readers to actively engage with the text to create new understandings and explore their identities. In this next section, I discuss reader response and its value for young readers.

Reader Response

Reader response theory offers a valuable and insightful starting point for involving literature in the lives of African American males. Reading literature, according to Rosenblatt (1995), presents the possibilities for a democratic education, creating opportunities for students to imagine and critique the experiences of other people. Far more than simply offering opportunities for scholarly treatment of texts, literature also invites students to experience life through other people's lives, bridging students' experiences with characters' experiences and creating an arena in which students can make sense of their own lives. In the sense that Rosenblatt views reading as a potentially aesthetic experience essential to life learning, I find her theories helpful in making sense of the potential influences of reading on the lives of African American males and their identity constructions. In a related way, for Sumara (2002), the text presents the opportunity for reader reflection and interpretation of experience, providing spaces for the crafting of identity, always in the process of becoming. In this sense, the text becomes a living document and something distinctly personal. Given its focus on meaning, interpretation, and the drawing on experience to create new meanings through connections between text and reader, reader response theories provide an essential lens for examining the literate lives of African American males and their constructions of identity through literature.

As viewed through reader response theory, the text becomes a living document, providing spaces for crafting identity, revising previously held schema, and taking into account diverse cultural codes, historical backgrounds, and experiences. For these reasons, the reading act as viewed through reader response theory becomes an essential tool in examining the identity constructions of African American males.

Chapter Three: Methodology

As I stated in my introduction, this research involved the use of ethnographic methods to examine adolescent African American males' constructions of identity using young adult novels in a high school English classroom. In this chapter, I detail my rationale for selecting this method, particularly regarding its suitability for classroom research. I then describe methods of data collection used in this research, provide an overview of the novel units through which data was collected, and introduce through biographical accounts the eleven participants.

What Is Ethnography?

With its roots extending back to the early 1900s and steeped in cultural anthropology, ethnography owes its beginnings to such scholars as Boas, Malinowski, and Mead among others. While the method originally hails from the anthropology discipline, through the years, scholars in other academic fields, including education, have applied aspects of the ethnographic method to their own studies, generating new theories and applications (Creswell, 1998). As a result, what is considered genuinely ethnographic has become much more complex and difficult to define and identify.

A review of several scholars' definitions of ethnography reveals a lack of consensus about what precisely constitutes ethnography. Yates (1987) states, "The ethnographic perspective is difficult to reduce to a formula" (p. 62). Likewise, Agar (1980) states, "*Ethnography* is an ambiguous term, representing both a process and a product (p. 1, emphasis in original). Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) note the range of definitions describing ethnography as a research method centering on cultural understanding to an approach studying social patterns of a cultural group to a more holistic investigation of a given society. For example, Van Maanen (1988) describes ethnography as "written representation of a culture" (p. 1) and "portraits of

diversity in an increasingly homogenous world" (pp. xiii-xiv). Agar (1980) views the methodology as "a social relationship within which an exchange of information occurs" (p. 1). Angrosino (2007) states that ethnography is "the descriptive study of people in their natural settings" (p. 2). Wolcott (2008) describes the ethnographer's task as the need to "make the familiar strange" (p. 231) and Erickson (1977) emphasizes that ethnography does not lend itself to a set of prescribed research techniques. Rather, as Wolcott (1997) asserts, "It is an inquiry process carried out by human beings and guided by a point of view that derives from experience in the research setting and from knowledge of prior anthropological research" (p. 158). Finally, ethnography may also be defined by active researcher participation in a culture for the purpose of developing and testing theories concerning a culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Wolcott, 1987). As evidenced by these and other definitions of ethnography, scholars do not fully agree on all that constitutes ethnographic research.

Even with the broad scope of qualifiers, however, one area of general agreement exists—that ethnographic researchers characteristically immerse themselves in the daily lives of participants for long periods of time, observing, interacting, and interviewing members of the group (Agar, 1980; Creswell, 1998; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Lareau & Schultz, 1996; O'Reilly, 2009; Wolcott, 2008). In this regard, Lareau and Schultz state, "There is an effort to understand the view of the participants; researchers seek to be in the setting long enough to acquire some notion of acceptance and understanding" (p. 3). Underscoring the monumental task of seeking to understand another culture, Agar (1980) states:

> Ethnography is really quite an arrogant enterprise. In a short period of time, an ethnographer moves in among a group of strangers to study and describe their beliefs, document their social life, write about their subsistence strategies, and generally explore the territory right down to their recipes for the evening meal. The task is an impossible one. At best, an ethnography can only be partial (p. 41).

In their observing and interacting with members of a particular group in the process of ethnography, ethnographic researchers essentially seek to study and better understand a group's culture, remaining humbly mindful that a complete understanding may be elusive.

School Ethnography

Because it presents opportunities for theoretical and pedagogical connections, ethnography offers practical applications for school practitioners. Woods (1986) suggests that ethnography presents an opportunity to help "close the gulf between researcher and teacher, educational research and educational practice, theory and practice," (p. 4). In other words, ethnography may be useful due to its potential for researchers to serve dual roles as researcher and participant. For this reason, ethnography may be especially valuable to teachers. Furthermore, because of the very nature of their work, many teachers are already accustomed to the traditions of participant observation, a data collection method commonly utilized in ethnography and characterized by the researcher not only observing participants but also participating with them (O'Reilly, 2009). In this regard, Pollard (1985) states, "Teachers themselves have considerable experience as participant observers and as interviewers on this kind of basis" (as cited in Woods, 1986, p. 6). Woods (1986) likewise makes the point that the accessibility of the ethnographic approach makes it more user friendly for teachers. He acknowledges that such accessibility does not make ethnographic research easier than other methods, but it does provide for use of teacher's existing knowledge base and experiences.

Another valuable aspect of ethnography in schools concerns ethnography's capacity to yield understandings and insight that may not be attainable through other methods, as well as provide practical pedagogical connections. Specifically, the ethnographic perspective, in its "willingness to look again at existing categories and emphases which explain educational

phenomena," assists in the understanding of "our own position in the process of education" and "increases our facility for productive action" (Yates, 1987, p. 62). For example, ethnographic methods have been used to explore perspectives of teachers and students and the motivations for their behaviors; some ethnographers have sought to understand pupil deviance while others have explored workings of inequalities in the classroom (Woods, 1986). The author points out that because "the researcher is the chief research instrument" in ethnography (p. 8), the teacher as ethnographer possesses a significant amount of control over the areas explored and the methods used in the research. As a result, "ethnography thus offers teachers an engagement with research and a direction over it" (p. 9).

Some aspects of schooling with which ethnography has traditionally been concerned include the effects of certain organizational structures on individuals and groups within the educational institution; subjective experiences of students and teachers with various aspects of schooling; cultural studies of certain groups within schooling; actions and meanings behind individuals' actions; attitudes and philosophies of teachers and students regarding each other and certain facets of education; and the ways in which specific situations inherent in schooling motivate participants' attitudes and behaviors (Chang, 1992; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997; Ferguson, 2001; Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1981; Pascoe, 2008; Philips, 1983; Wolcott, 2008). In light of these ethnographic trends, Woods (1986) cites an urgent need to conduct ethnographic research on school administration and its decision making processes, relationships among school staff, school culture, teacher identities and teacher perspectives regarding their careers, and student views about teachers and the formation of these opinions (pp. 10-11). For each of these research possibilities, the unique contribution to be made specifically by

ethnography resides in the potential for greater awareness and understanding of behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes.

Why Ethnography?

Given its attention to culture and its "examination and observation of behavior in its social context" (Wolcott, 1987), ethnography is well-suited for this study. Specifically, Nasir (2012) states, "Learning and identity are always cultural and social processes linked in fundamental ways to the contexts in which they occur" (p. 18). In this regard, then, the current study seeks to better understand cultural and social processes of African American males in their learning environment within a school. And because ethnography seeks to better understand this culture, the research method is well suited for this study.

While scholars differ on the precise definitions they attribute to ethnography, one point of agreement is that the ethnographic method centers on the study of a group's culture (Creswell, 1998; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Heath & Street, 2008). However, ethnography's focus on culture does not make the delineation of the methodology any more simplistic. This is due to the lack of consensus surrounding what defines "culture," as well as disagreement about the extent to which any ethnographer can accurately represent a group's culture. Heath and Street (2008) acknowledge these challenges, stating, "Widespread public usage of the nouns 'a culture' or 'cultures' makes the ethnographer's work especially difficult," (p. 8). Discrepancies about the meaning of culture are also amplified when one considers not only its shifting meanings *within* a culture but also *across c*ultures. As a result, "ethnographers face loose and varying popularized definitions of 'culture' in every setting" (p.10).

As a result of this ongoing conversation, several notable scholars have attempted to better characterize the concept of culture in ethnography. Heath and Street (2008), for example,

conceptualize culture as a verb instead of a noun, hence underscoring the idea that "culture never just 'is,' but instead 'does'" (Thornton, 1988, as cited in Heath and Street, 2008). Culture in this sense represents a more fluid entity, rather than something static possessed by groups with fixed boundaries (p. 8). Wolcott (2008) likewise emphasizes the complexity of culture seen in the ethnographer's attempt at cultural representation. Countering the misconception that culture is simply present, awaiting discovery by the ethnographer, Wolcott underscores the role of interpretation in drawing a portrait of a culture. Put simply, "culture…does not exist until the ethnographer renders such an account," (p. 246) nor can it be directly observed (p. 242). Adding yet another dimension to this cultural equation is the understanding that, as Wolcott mentions, the culture the ethnographer attempts to interpret is seen first through the ethnographer's own cultural experiences. In this way, Wolcott considers ethnography to be "the 'social construction' of reality, recognition of the role we ourselves play in the interpretation of the world around us" (p. 247). Such an understanding of culture situates the ethnographer as only one interpreter, one perspective, one set of cultural understandings filtering one angle of a group's experiences through one lens at one moment in time.

The classroom presents such an opportunity to examine the complex workings of culture. Considering the multiple cultures, complete with their unique, intrinsic codes and norms, interacting within the boundaries of one setting at one given moment in time, Heath and Street (2008) note the cultural dynamics operating within institutions of formal education: officially sanctioned norms and cultural codes emanating from societal forces beyond the classroom, particular cultural norms to which the instructor subscribes and officially sanctions in the classroom, and the complex interactions of multiple cultural groups—groups which themselves symbolize a diversity of values and prescribed norms—represented by students who interact in

the same space. For example, Heath and Street (2008) note the sanctioning of certain languages and "literate skills" by formal institutions of learning and the subsequent pushing aside or undervaluing of the expertise of individuals or groups not considered "advanced" (p. 19). It is these and other complex workings of culture that ethnography seeks to understand. Such an understanding of culture as related specifically to educational institutions is essential for the ethnographic researcher engaging in school-based research.

Fieldwork and Participant Observation

While the ethnographer may choose from among a variety of possible data collection methods, for the purposes and scope of this research, I adopted the role of participant observer in the field for the purposes of data collection. Distinctly characteristic of ethnography (although not exclusive to ethnography), participant observation is one of several data collection methods[6] used by the ethnographer in the field to attempt to gain a better understanding of participants in their natural settings.

Participant Observation

As a data collection method for ethnographers in the field, participant observation exists under the umbrella of qualitative methods and emanates from traditions of ethnography. Within the greater qualitative tradition, participant observation has as its purpose the studying of perspectives as held by participants—a purpose also central to this study. In this regard, Woods (1986) states, "The central idea of participation is to penetrate the experiences of others within a group or institution" (p. 33). As a result, when researchers engage in participant observation,

[6] The literature reviewed suggests a lack of consensus as to whether participant observation is indeed a method. For example, Ellen (1984) states, "Participant observation is not, and cannot be, a method" (p. 221). Yet Dobbert (1982), Woods (1986), and O'Reilly (2009) refer to participant observation as the main *method* of ethnography, while Jorgensen (1989) refers to "the *methodology* of participant observation" (p. 12).

they seek to become intimately involved in other people's lives as they are experienced on a day-to-day basis, essentially fulfilling the role of "researcher as instrument" (Heath & Street, 2008).

In participant observation, the researcher aims to gain entry to insiders' daily lives as viewed from the perspective of insiders by sharing in the activities of participants, and learning their behaviors, language, and customs (Becker, 1958; Jorgensen, 1989). Such immersion in the culture provides unique opportunities for deeper examination. For example, Gans (1999) considers participant observation his "preferred method," because "it allows researchers to observe what people do, while all the other empirical methods are limited to reporting what people say about what they do" (p. 540). Consequently, participant observation offers opportunities for especially rich data, typically requiring the researcher to form relationships with participants, thereby experiencing rather than merely observing (Amit, 2000). Such relationships are negotiated by the researcher and participants in a socially-constructed arena (Coffey, 1999). Data gathering, then, becomes a social process as the researcher works in collaboration with participants to construct meaning. Participating in the culture in this manner enables researchers to gain understandings of individuals in their natural, everyday settings (Jorgensen, 1989). In the context of the current study, the potential for such rich insights makes participant observation an effective method for studying the perspectives of African American males.

Aside from its value in acquiring participants' perspectives, participant observation offers another advantage. The data collected can provide the researcher a valuable source for comparing participants' statements concerning their activities and beliefs. Such an approach, according to O'Reilly (2009), "gives an insight into things people may otherwise forget to mention or would not normally want to discuss" (p. 155). In other words, participants can say

they act in certain manners, but participant observation enables the researcher to verify these actions, as well. Furthermore, participant observation enables the researcher to acquire a greater understanding of participants' cultural and social environments, their relationships, and their behaviors. As a result, the researcher gains an intimate understanding of a group of people—an understanding built through relationships with participants.

Since the current study seeks such an understanding, participant observation aligns well with its purpose. Similarly, in the sense that the researcher in the role of participant observer essentially takes part in daily activities with participants, I found participant observation to fit well with my particular research. Besides, given my previous employment at the school and my prior experiences in teaching high school English, simply participating in this study as a detached observer may have proven awkward or difficult. Furthermore, the activities surrounding the novel units required my active participation and engagement with the students.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork represents one of the defining characteristics of ethnography and involves the immersion of the researcher in the field for the purposes of collecting data. The opportunity for the collection of rich data through field work is among the strengths of the ethnographic method. As Wolcott (1997) states, the data collected by the researcher in the field typically consists of a variety of approaches and data collection points. In this same vein, Wolcott states, "The strength of fieldwork lies in its 'triangulation,' obtaining information in many ways rather than relying solely on one" (p. 158). Even though fieldwork is not unique to ethnography and also may be conducted in other social sciences, fieldwork in ethnography usually involves the researcher living among and interacting with the individuals being studied. As traditionally conceived, fieldwork in ethnography characteristically requires an extended period of involvement by the

researcher in the lives of participants, usually taking place where the participants reside and in their communities, as well (Amit, 2000; Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991). In this way, it is assumed the immersion of the researcher in the field provides the opportunity for the researcher to learn through lived experience.

Kleinman and Copp (1993) discuss emotions as they relate to field work, examining researchers' feelings concerning the data collection process. The authors remind us that ethnographers, even though they enter the field as researchers, still function as members of a social group, and therefore possess socially constructed identities. Consequently, the life experiences and identities of the researcher bear significant weight on the ways in which field encounters will be interpreted (p. 10). Specifically, the authors underscore the subjective nature of the researcher as a point of data collection; unlike many modes of inquiry that enable the researcher to maintain an objective distance, ethnography provides far greater opportunity for the researcher's influence and involvement, hence presenting the allure of forming relationships with participants, accompanied by the emotional aspects of these relationships.

While the traditional view of ethnography has placed the ethnographer in the field far from home, ethnography can also be conducted in the ethnographer's native place. Notable examples of such ethnographies conducted here in the United States include Harry Walcott's 1973 ethnography, *The man in the principal's office: An ethnography*, which investigates the life of an elementary school principal, and Philippe Bourgois's 1996 ethnography, *In search of respect: Selling crack in El Barrio*, which details the experiences of drug dealers in East Harlem. In his ethnography, Bourgois is able to enter the world of crack dealers through participant observation, obtaining an intimate view of their life experiences.

Whether fieldwork occurs far from the researcher's native place or in spaces nearby, opportunities exist in fieldwork to develop close relationships with research participants, learn about a new culture, and experience the sense of pride that accompanies successfully navigating the various challenges involved in fieldwork and emerging with a greater understanding of a community different from the researcher's own. In this sense, ethnographic fieldwork offers similar opportunities in the current study of African American males and their constructions of identity in the school setting.

The Study

This research constitutes a qualitative study using ethnographic methods. Data collection took place at Bayou Central High School[7] from November 2012 through March 2013 and included observations, interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and collection of participants' work. Participants included eleven African American adolescent males enrolled in Ms. Clark's sophomore English classes at second and third periods. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and participants were made aware of their freedom to choose to participate or not. They were also informed that they would not receive penalties for declining to participate. Ultimately, all eleven African American boys consented to participating and completed and signed required consent forms for the study.

Description of Context

The research for this study was conducted at Bayou Central High School, a large public high school in a suburban neighborhood. At the time of my research, there were 1505 students enrolled, representing a variety of ethnicities. The ethnic composition of the student population was as follows: Caucasian, 59%; African American, 38%; Hispanic, 1%; and less than 2%

[7] All names of places and people are pseudonyms used to protect the identity of the individuals in this study. .

Native American, Asian, or Pacific Islander. Gender breakdown was 50% male, 50% female. In addition, there were 87 classroom teachers employed at the school, a principal, and four assistant principals, along with an extensive staff of school counselors, special education liaisons, secretaries, custodians, and cafeteria workers. For this particular school year, the school was rated a two-star school with an SPS score of 113.6, officially a B school. Additionally, the school had attained its growth target from the previous school year but had not reached its adequate yearly progress in the subgroup of economically disadvantaged. Other pertinent statistics for this school included a 79% on-time graduation rate, 48% of the student qualified for free lunch, and the school was designated a Title I school (Louisiana Department of Education). In addition, the school operated on a seven-period day schedule, and classes met every day throughout the school year. The particular classes with which I conducted this study were two English II classes taught by Ms. Clark at second and third period during the 2012-2013 school year. Ms. Clark was a second-year teacher, certified in secondary English. Her classroom was near mine during her first year of teaching, and I often served as her mentor during that year, as we taught in the same department.

Data

Gathered through fieldwork and participant observation, the data for this study emanate from several sources: observations, surveys, questionnaires, individual interviews, focus group interviews, participant journal responses, and participant work samples from two young adult novel units. The validity of a qualitative study is bolstered by such multiple gathering points, a process officially termed triangulation (Angrosino, 2007). Similarly, Yin (2011) states, “In collecting data, the ideal triangulation would not only seek confirmation from three sources but

would try to find three different kinds of sources" (p. 81). Such considerations of triangulation guided my selection of data gathering methods for the study.

The participants provided the major source of data for the current study. Participants in the study were eleven African American adolescent males who attended Bayou Central High School and who were enrolled in Ms. Clark's sophomore English II classes at second and third periods. They were selected based upon their African American ethnicity, male gender, and enrollment in these two class periods. I solicited the participants through conversations I had with them about my study during initial visits to their English classes. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary, and all eleven boys consented to participating.

Observations

In the spirit of ethnographic methodology, I began the study by conducting observations of the fieldsite, Ms. Clark's second and third period English classroom, three times per week. Among several reasons, observations were essential to this study because observations "form the basis from which we can develop questions for surveys or interviews" (Angrosino, 2007, p. 2).The focus of these observations was to document the interactions of the participants with the teacher, with each other, and with other students in the class. I also took note of participants' responses to teacher questions, their reactions to events in the novels, and their commentary on daily journal topics. Furthermore, I sought to gain a better understanding of the learning environment in which the participants operated daily.

The observations continued for a period of four months; initial observations were dedicated to surveying the classroom environment, particularly the interactions of participants with their classmates, the teacher, and each other. I also hoped to establish rapport with participants. Such rapport is a necessity, particularly given the potential of ethnographic methods

for development of quality relationships between researcher and participants, as well as the deeper understandings the method provides for (O'Reilly, 2009). With this in mind, I proceeded with the understanding that such relationships do not merely result from chance. Rather, "they are the outcome of negotiation between the social researcher and the social actors in the field" (Coffey, 1999, p. 48). With this framework, I devoted the beginning stages of my data collection to the building of relationships with the participants through a series of informal conversations.

Aside from the development of rapport through observations, field notes also constitute an essential aspect of observations. Therefore, throughout this study, I wrote field notes for each site visit, following up with my own review and reflections. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) define fieldnotes as "accounts describing experiences and observations the researcher has made while participating in an intense and involved manner" (p. 4). These fieldnotes collectively function as an important part of this study, not merely as objective recordings of events that happened in the field, but more significantly, part of the "active processes of interpretation and sense-making" (p. 8). In other words, in the sense that I chose to include some events in fieldnotes, excluding others, the writing of fieldnotes represents my own lens at work, impacting the understandings to be synthesized upon completion of the project (p. 9). Acknowledging this reflexivity constitutes an essential component of the ethnographic research process. As Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) point out:

> Reflexivity, when applied to the understanding of members' worlds, helps us to see those worlds as shaped not by variables or structures that stand above or apart from people but rather as meaning systems negotiated and constructed in and through relationships. Hence, when self-consciously applied to ourselves as researchers, the reflexive lens helps us see and appreciate how our own renderings of others' worlds are not and can never be descriptions from outside those worlds. Rather, they are informed by and constructed in and through relationships with those under study (p. 216).

The more subjective aspects of ethnographic methods, however, do not render the results of this study any less reliable or valid. Rather, in the sense that meaning making for ethnography takes place through relationships the researcher forms with participants, as well as the experiencing of participants' everyday lives, meanings are continually fortified through a merging of researcher viewpoints and those of participants.

Interviews

Individual interviews were held with each of the eleven participants near the beginning of the study. Interviews were held in the hallway outside the classroom and lasted approximately 25-35 minutes each. Questions for the individual interviews (see Appendix A) centered on participants' conceptions of school literacy, their out-of-school literacy habits, their perceptions of the role of literacy in their neighborhoods and communities, and the perceived roles of schooling in their own lives. Informal interviews, held spontaneously throughout the course of the novel units, consisted of questions seeking participants' views on novel themes and characters, as well as their personal connections to the novels.

Focus group interviews, which sought to further clarify information from initial interviews, were held on two occasions—once at the end of the *Monster* novel unit and again at the conclusion of *The First Part Last*. Both interviews lasted approximately 35-45 minutes. The first focus interview took place in the hallway outside the classroom; participants and I sat on the floor in a circle in the middle of the hallway. For the second focus interview, we met in the school library downstairs and sat together at one of the tables there. Questions for both focus interviews sought participants' insights on perceived value of schooling and its impact on identity, the influences of various classroom practices employed by teachers, the significance of sports for identity creation, and the role of peer influences on school performance.

All interviews were tape recorded with participant permission. Prior to the start of the interviews, I asked participants to select a pseudonym for themselves, as I would not be revealing their actual names in my paper, and I emphasized confidentiality of responses. I also further clarified the purpose of my research project and explained that participation in the study was completely voluntary at all stages of the project. Following each interview, I gave myself time to reflect upon the student's responses and write my own thoughts and observations, in addition to generate ideas for further interview questions.

Surveys and Questionnaires

In addition to observations and interviews, I also distributed surveys and questionnaires to participants throughout the study. The purpose of these data-gathering instruments was to discover what participants felt most comprised their identities. Pre-study and post-study identity surveys (See Appendix B) were conducted, which sought participants' thoughts on important factors influencing their own identity formation. In addition, a pre-study and post-study school interest survey (See Appendix C) was given to participants. The focus of this survey was participants' opinions regarding schooling in general, reading more specifically. Participants also completed two questionnaires (See Appendix D)—one featuring open-ended items about participants' connections to the two novel units, and a second involving open-ended, general questions about participants' perceived identities.

Other Supporting Data

Other data collected throughout the study included copies of: participants' daily journals, participants' reading journals, introductory personal essays composed at the start of the school year, paragraphs about defining moments in participants' lives, a computer lab project completed about participants' identities, and copies of group work completed throughout the novel units.

Ethical Considerations

Studies employing ethnographic methods raise particular ethical issues, including those of validity and bias. Because of the subjective nature of ethnography and the central role of researcher as research instrument, ethnographic researchers especially have been subject to claims of researcher bias. In this regard, Angrosino (2007) states, "Qualitative researchers in general, and those who use observational techniques in particular, have long been vulnerable to charges that their findings are biased because of the subjectivity that is an inevitable part of this style of inquiry" (p. 89). The very nature of observation as a data collection method raises suspicions since the data collected is subject to researcher interpretation (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). While it is beyond the scope of this research to delve into the historical arguments concerning research as "value-free" (p. 91), the mere fact that any research requires the selection of particular methods over others and certain participants instead of others, underscores the point that all researchers, regardless of the method selected, still impose their values and judgments on the research process and in some way influence the outcomes. Ethnographic methods, as part of the qualitative tradition, bear the same weight of influence.

Given this burden of proof, however, there are ways the ethnographic researcher can bolster the validity of the data collected. One method is through triangulation of data. As I have mentioned previously, triangulation involves using multiple sources of data for better quality information (Angrosino, 2007; Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2009). Regarding the present study, I attempted to ensure validity of my findings by collecting a wide variety of data at different times throughout the study. For example, data collection included interviews, observations, surveys, questionnaires, and student work samples.

I also worked to support this study's validity through "peer debriefing," a process by which the researcher asks another individual to review the ethnographic accounts and ask questions about the study to ensure that "the account will resonate with people other than the researcher" (Creswell, 2009, p. 192). In this way, another interpretation enhances the validity of the research. In the current study, the classroom teacher of the participants conducted the peer debriefing and provided another source of review for my findings.

Finally, as researcher, I operated within a framework of transparency regarding my own subjectivities brought to bear upon this research. Such transparency represents yet another method for supporting validity and is achieved by attempting to "clarify the bias the researcher brings to the study" (Creswell, 2009). Since the researcher serves as the data collection instrument in ethnographic research, findings can be especially influenced by researchers' perspectives. As opposed to a masking of these natural subjectivities, an awareness of these perspectives by the researcher is warranted. As a result, the ethnographic researcher learns "how to be more consciously aware of the sources of our [sic] subjective judgment—not to eliminate them entirely, but to use them so that they enhance rather than obscure the research endeavor" (Angrosino, 2007, p. 92). Put simply, ethnographic researchers can address concerns of bias by illuminating their positions and examining their subjectivities in their research.

Such transparency also extended to my relationships with the participants. As I have previously mentioned, I worked throughout the data collection process to establish rapport with the participants. However, I did not want to simply get what I needed for my research and leave the field with my treasures. Rather, in the spirit of reciprocity (Coffey, 1999), I sought to remain ever mindful of what the participants were gaining in exchange for their participation in the study. While not nearly sufficient to convey the extent of my appreciation for their sharing their

lives and innermost thoughts with me, I decided to donate a set of the novels (*Monster* by Myers) to the classroom, hoping that future groups of students might also have the opportunity to enjoy the novel as the participants had.

Analysis

Discussing the procedure of analyzing data in ethnographic studies, Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) write that "the collection of data is guided strategically by the developing theory" (p. 174). Because of the developing nature of theory in ethnographic studies, data analysis does not constitute a separate, isolated stage of research. Rather, "theory building and data collection are dialectically linked" (p. 174). As a result, ethnographic studies resemble a somewhat "funnel" shape, given the inductive nature of theory building that progresses throughout the collection of data (p.175). Furthermore, because of this inductive structure, ethnographic researchers often begin with one set of research questions and complete the project with a distinctly different focus.

Relating to the current study, I began my investigation with a broad concept of what I sought to explore through my project, understanding that my focus and/or purpose could change at any time if emerging data necessitated. Using my initial research questions as a guide, I engaged in preliminary observations of the field site to begin the data collection process. The purpose of these initial observations was to survey the environment of this particular classroom, observe interactions between students and their teacher, and examine classroom details, such as wall postings, organization of classroom spaces, and various instructional artifacts. The data collected from these initial observations then influenced subsequent observations, narrowing their scope. Throughout the study, I conducted classroom observations three times per week for a

period of four months. I also wrote field notes during each observation, documenting day-to-day events and conversations among participants, their classmates, and their teacher.

Also included in the data collection process were interviews of participants—both individual and focus group interviews. I conducted individual interviews once at the start of the project and again near the end, whereas I held focus group interviews at the conclusion of each of the two novel units. Informal interviews also took place throughout the observation process, particularly when participants worked in groups on assigned tasks.

These field notes and interviews comprised the transcripts I used for coding. I transcribed my field notes and interviews throughout the course of the study, continually reviewing transcripts to search for emerging themes. After all transcriptions were completed, I read and coded all the data according to the constant-comparative analysis method (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2011), using paper coding and category building. This process of analysis led to the emergence of themes, which I then used to frame the discussions in chapters four and five. Although these themes determined the framework for chapters four and five, I continually assessed and evaluated the themes and categories throughout the writing of the chapters. Furthermore, I supported the trustworthiness of my findings through the use of multiple data collection methods and asked participants to check for accuracy of data collected.

Limitations

For the simple fact that the researcher serves as the data collection instrument in ethnographic research, the data gathering process is accompanied by certain limitations, namely a greater burden of proof regarding trustworthiness of data. In other words, because of the researcher's central role in such studies, along with the researcher's accompanying subjectivities, there exists a greater need to support data trustworthiness. As the researcher for this project, I,

too, brought my own subjectivities to this research. Furthermore, my own experiences, perspectives, and ideologies filtered what I looked for in this study and the sense I made from what I found. Such influences are undeniable and expected in this kind of research, and results should be read with the understanding that they represent one individual's synthesis. Another individual conducting the same study might report entirely different findings.

Another limitation of this research involves sample size. This study involved two sophomore English classes taught by the same teacher. However, because the study centered on the African American males in those two classes (and all participated), there were only eleven participants. As a result, the results of this research cannot be broadly generalized to other contexts, as the findings are specific to this group of students in these two English classes at this particular school. Likewise, this study is centered on the perceptions of these students only and does not include interviews of teachers or data collected from them. As such, the findings from this project should be viewed as a partial account of the experiences of African American adolescent males—a segment of a much larger puzzle and not the final word on their experiences.

As I alluded to earlier, my own subjectivities represent another limitation for this particular research. My identity as a white, middle-class female and a former teacher and administrator at the school site (an insider) undoubtedly influenced my findings and other factors, as well. First, the simple fact that a white, female teacher is undertaking the current research is likely to raise a few eyebrows, drawing criticism, suspicions, or doubt. As I have already divulged in my introduction my connections to this research and reasons for conducting it, I will not use this space to elaborate further. Rather, I am merely noting potential impacts of my membership in the white race on the ways my findings are perceived. Likewise, I

acknowledge that my whiteness may have symbolized for some participants past white female teachers with whom they struggled, presenting yet another example of how my identity as researcher may have influenced my findings. Second, my prior position as administrator at the school site and participants' awareness of this may have shaped their responses or their behaviors in class sessions I observed, perhaps rendering me suspect in their eyes and possibly resulting in their censoring responses and behaviors.

Yet another potential limitation involves the simple fact that this study represents a school ethnography. While the unique insights offered by such studies are valuable, I am aware of the tendency for teachers with little anthropological training to claim they are "doing ethnography." A common misapplication of ethnography involves the researcher calling the project "ethnography" simply because research involves observation or field work. Regarding the potential for such inaccuracies, Wolcott (1997) states, "I think it is useful to distinguish between anthropologically informed researchers who *do ethnography* and educational researchers who frequently *draw upon ethnographic approaches* in doing descriptive studies" (p. 166, emphasis in original). Ethnography, he argues, is not defined by the techniques the researcher employs throughout a study; rather the hallmarks of ethnography lie in the interpretation the researcher applies to what has been observed.

Finally, the school climate in which this research was undertaken may have shaped findings, as well. This study was conducted amidst what many considered a significant upheaval in the educational arena. With controversial reform measures being implemented--namely the value-added teacher evaluation model, Compass teacher evaluation instrument, and the Common Core State Standards—teachers at this school site seemed particularly stressed, tense, and nervous. With the looming threat of administrators and state educational officials entering the

classroom to observe unannounced on any given day, many teachers appeared to exist in a continual state of hyper-vigilance. The teacher in this study operated similarly. The significance of this environment regarding this research lies in the impact of such an environment on the classroom, the fieldsite and observation data collection point for this study. It is possible that, given a different environment, the teacher may have been more relaxed, open to trying different instructional strategies and activities, and perhaps students would have appeared more at ease, feeling more freedom in their speech and actions, resulting in the creation of a more fluid classroom setting.

Participants

Participants included all African American male students in Ms. Clark's two sophomore English classes for the 2012-2013 school year. There were, therefore, a total of eleven participants in this study. All names in this study are pseudonyms chosen by the participants in order to protect their identities. Descriptors of participants below are written in the present tense and should be assumed current at the time of this study.

BMore: BMore is sixteen years old and lives with his mother and her boyfriend. His parents divorced when he was younger, at which time his brother moved away to live with his father. Known as a class clown, BMore confidently interacts with his teachers through spirited verbal exchanges, exhibiting an endearing sense of humor and an infectious personality. This very personality, however, is often misinterpreted or simply misunderstood by his teachers, earning him multiple discipline referrals, trips to the office, and subsequently, in-school suspensions. School, in his opinion, is not fair for African American boys, as he claims to have witnessed, through his repeated trips to the office, students of other ethnicities being awarded lighter sentences for infractions identical to his. BMore, however, insists he tries to behave,

particularly since his brother was recently sent to jail for troubles on the street. Sports, especially basketball and track, play an essential role in BMore's life because they keep him out of trouble. In fact, one of his proudest moments relates to sports—his being named MVP for biddy basketball. After school hours, BMore can usually be found on the neighborhood basketball court, shooting hoops with his friends. To him, reading books is something people do only when bored. In fact, English is among his least favorite classes, in addition to math. As a result, he is not likely to be found reading books after school hours. Yet reading about sports is another story, as he often spends his spare time researching statistics and highlights for his favorite sports teams on the internet. Sports also provide the foundation for BMore's future, as he dreams of getting drafted to play basketball or run track for the Olympics. However, he does have a backup plan—photography. A true believer that family is most important in life, BMore prides himself on being unique. While he admits he wears a uniform like everyone else at the school, he insists he is different because he wears his pants tucked inside his socks.

Jay: Jay is seventeen years old and recently moved to live with his girlfriend upon the birth of their daughter this school year. Looked upon by other students as "the mature one," Jay appears to possess wisdom and insight beyond his years. He recognizes the importance of finishing school, particularly since he would be the first in his family to graduate from high school. However, struggles have defined his life so far, namely repeated episodes of fighting throughout middle school, as others picked on him for his small size. Jay has not made the honor roll since then. In addition, similar to many of the participants, Jay had an early brush with the law that impacted his life. When he was younger, his house caught on fire. Authorities arrived, and Jay was blamed because he had the matchbox in his hand. However, the blame actually belonged to his little brother, who had lit the match and then dropped it, setting the house afire.

Ultimately, the entire house burned, leaving the family unable to salvage anything. Presently a high school sophomore, he values sports and recognizes the role sports play in encouraging his performance in school. To Jay, playing sports motivates him to excel in school, and he is often found playing basketball at the park after school hours. At the current time, he cites English and math as his favorite classes, whereas civics ranks among his least favorite. The real-life applications of English and math appeal to him, but the mundane activity of repetitive note taking in civics draws his ire. While not a fan of writing outside of school, he does engage in some reading at home, particularly fiction and sports magazines and books, but only when he has nothing else to do. Having a baby has made an indelible impression on him, too, giving him extra incentive to perform well in school and making him see "how life should really be." In the future, Jay desires "to go to college, finish college, have a nice job, and take care of my family." Interestingly enough, however, he admits that he has not thought much about a lifetime career, though he does enjoy working with his hands and helping people. Regardless of what he ultimately decides to do with his education, he insists that education is "a ticket to bigger and better things" and that the pain and struggle associated with schooling is just a temporary state endured for a much greater prize. Jay has a tattoo with the words "self made," representing his belief that he is a "self-made person." Specifically, Jay says, "Nobody can make you do anything. I'm my own person."

John: John is sixteen years old and recently moved to live with his grandmother. His former residence was with his mother, sister, and brother in what he considers "the hood." Similar to many of the other participants, a sense of struggle has defined his life to this point. As a young boy in school, he was bullied for his small size, although he admits he also bullied others. But perhaps his biggest struggle of all began just a week after his parents separated. He

and his older brother were at a neighborhood park, when he heard three shots ring out. He looked back to see his brother dead on the sidewalk. His brother's death, a defining moment in his life, still resonates with him today and serves as motivation for him. In this regard, John states, "One day I'm gonna make it and give back to my mom and keep my promise to my brother. He is what strives me and made me into who I am." In fact, John has two tattoos dedicated to his brother—one with the words "RIP RJ" and the other, the number 17 as this was the age at which his brother died. Presently, as a sophomore at Bayou Central High School, John prefers science class because "it is easy," and the teacher is fun but dislikes math because he claims a lack of ability in the subject. Although he does not specifically reference English in his list of liked or despised courses, he declares disdain for writing in general and does not spend time writing outside of school. However, if he must write in school, he prefers to write about something related to his life. Similarly, reading does not interest him either, though he did enjoy the book *The Outsiders*, which his class read in middle school. *Sports Illustrated* is also on his list of acceptable reads, mainly because it relates to one of his passions. Sports, to him, represent a way of taking his mind off of things. A running back and wide receiver for the school football team, John also plays basketball and boxing in his spare time. Aside from sports, like many of the participants, John views school discipline as arbitrary, saying, "They write you up for stupid stuff." He also suspects preferential treatment for some kids, particularly those who do well in their classes. But he does not begrudge those students who do well, noting their popularity when everyone wants to cheat off of them.

Al: A sixteen-year-old sophomore at the high school, Al lives with his mother and father, whom he says, "try to be young and hip, but it is not working." Al also has three older sisters and a younger brother. In his spare time, he likes to sit by the bayou side, clear his mind, and just

relax. Reading and writing, however, are not likely to be spare time activities for Al. If he is caught reading, the piece usually pertains to sports, more specifically the ESPN site on the internet, where he skims through sports articles and scores. In school, he prefers to read fiction and detests nonfiction. In fact, *The Lightning Thief* is a book he cites as a favorite. Active parental involvement in his life is evident, as Al cites early memories of his mother reading many books to him. Interestingly, Al does not associate himself with the other participants, claiming a distinct difference from the others. He attributes this difference to "the way I was raised. You have to stay away from a bad group and find someone that you know is going to relate yourself to you." To Al, African American males lack common sense, wasting their talents and energies on frivolous, trivial activities, when a little focused hard work could yield great success. During lunch recess, Al can usually be found hanging out with the white boys and plays on the school baseball team, which is predominantly white, as well. In fact, Al's association with aspects of schooling typically deemed "white boy territory" was highlighted at one of the school baseball games. Upon seeing Al's father watching the baseball game, another player's father asked him, "Which one is your son?" referencing the stark contrast between the predominant white hue of the crowd and the distinct blackness of Al's father. Though sports are important to Al, he cites religion as the most important aspect of his life. In fact, his faith seems to function as support for his performance in sports. He states, "When I'm about to play football, I always pray to Him to help me. I know that God is always watching me, so I really don't have anything to worry about." Like many of the participants, however, Al has experienced struggles in his earlier life, particularly with school. The one hope he has for his sophomore year is "to make it to the eleventh grade with no struggles."

Dee: Dee is seventeen years old and lives with his mother, step father, two brothers, and younger sister. His father died when he was younger, leaving him to help his mother raise his siblings for some time. Presently a sophomore at the high school, Dee enjoys social studies most, particularly those social studies classes that incorporate projects, especially those that enable him to showcase his artistic side. In fact, when his class is assigned group projects, he prides himself on being the person the group assigns to perform all the artwork. Conversely, what he does not like are classes conducted predominantly through in-class readings, as he prefers group activities. Regarding reading and writing at home, Dee will read a book at home "if it's interesting." But as for books at school, "most of the time, the books we read aren't interesting." On another note, similar to the other participants, Dee has battled adversity throughout his life. Citing these struggles, he states, "There's some things I been dealing with since kindergarten, like losing friends for stupid stuff." Dee's adversity has also involved the law. As a fourteen-year-old, Dee was arrested for acting on a dare from friends to throw a firecracker at a police car—something for which he performed multiple days of community service. Unlike many of the other participants who use sports as an outlet for dealing with struggles, however, Dee views drawing as his therapy. He can typically be found at home after school hours drawing roses, hearts, or whatever is on his mind. To him, drawing helps with whatever he is going through at the time. One day, he drew "the drama faces" (pair of Mardi Gras faces—one happy, one sad), symbolizing to him the power an individual has to change negative circumstances into positive, happy ones. Religion also provides a source of comfort for Dee, as well as a filter for helping him make sense of his life. He attends church regularly with his family. As Dee envisions it, his future involves "playing basketball one day," possibly drawing, or as a third alternative, "going to college for electronics" and "owning my own electrical company."

Ray: At eighteen years old, Ray is the oldest of the participants. At the present time, he lives with his mother, three sisters, and one brother in an area of town Ray declares unfit to raise his own family one day. His father died of heart problems when Ray was younger, and Ray believes this life-defining moment was at the root of many of his school-related behavioral issues that soon followed. Presently a sophomore at the high school, basketball is his favorite activity. Specifically regarding classes, Ray likes science best and dislikes math most, primarily due to his frustration with the subject. Regarding activities within classes, Ray prefers group activities, especially projects enabling students to talk with one another. Outside of school, however, reading and writing do not appear to exist on Ray's agenda, nor does he recall being read to as a young child. If he is required to read at school, he prefers books like *The Outsiders*. Motivated to do well in school by other people in his life, Ray sees school in direct reference to getting a better job. In fact, his plans after high school graduation include going straight to work. Among his list of future dreams are to meet Lebron James and Cam Newton, go to New York, live in Miami, and always make his mom proud. His motto for his life is: "You only live once" or "YOLO."

Vinny: Vinny is sixteen years old and represents the participant hardest to characterize, simply because of his elusive nature. More specifically, Vinny was often absent for classroom observations and when present, was often asking to leave the classroom to go to the nurse or the restroom. When he did remain in the classroom for the duration of a class period, he could usually be found drawing in his notebook or searching through his belongings for something. On the rare occasion that Vinny did participate in a class lesson, he often daydreamed or sat with his head on his desk. It was in my later interviews with him that I perhaps acquired a better explanation for these behaviors. As these explanations will be better disclosed throughout the

upcoming chapters, it is important to point out that Vinny felt a significant lack of connection to school. In fact, toward the middle of the school year, he began declaring to others that he was waiting to turn 16 so he could drop out and get his GED. Like many other participants verbalized, Vinny has worked throughout his life to overcome certain struggles, particularly middle school math and social studies. While a tutor was able to help him pass these classes, the struggles he endured in his classes made a lasting impression on him, leaving him with doubt that he ever would be successful in school. Presently a sophomore at the high school, he likes English, family and consumer sciences, biology, and power mechanics. Specifically within these classes, Vinny enjoys projects and group work most, as opposed to sitting alone taking notes. To him, English class is therapeutic, as it provides spaces for him to express how he feels. While he does not generally read outside of school, he does write at home, usually poems about "how the world is and how it's failing." Vinny's sensitive, intuitive nature has made him think about social work as a potential career, especially because he enjoys "making other happy and helping solve their problems so they don't have to be alone to do it." It is perhaps his more introspective persona that directs him in his choice of leisure activities, as well. As opposed to taking part in sports after school hours as many of the participants do, Vinny prefers to spend after-school hours playing video games. Video game designing is another future career prospect. Overall, Vinny's perspectives on education are perhaps most interesting. He states, "You hate school, but you love education…'cause it can get you somewhere instead of nowhere."

Sosa: Perhaps one of the more colorful, dynamic participants, Sosa is seventeen years old and lives with his grandmother. His father died when Sosa was nine, and his mother was never around, always in and out of the penitentiary system. I first met Sosa when he was walking down the hallway at school, moments after he was kicked out of Ms. Clark's class for a disturbance. As

for the reason for his discharge from the class, he said, “BMore called my lips ashy, and I couldn’t let that go.” A raucous had soon begun, and the teacher had sent Sosa to the office. While Sosa was encountering his own discipline issues at school, he had already begun his troubles with the law. During this same hallway meeting, Sosa lifted his pants leg to show me a black ankle monitoring bracelet he had just received for his alleged involvement in a recent armed robbery. His trial date would be in the spring with the possibility of several years behind bars. As interviews confirmed, these incidents were only symptoms of a much larger problem for Sosa. In addition to his recent run-ins with the law, he was rather outspoken about his affinity for drugs, claiming to be “a big fan of muscle relaxers and other pills.” In fact, in one interview, he proudly remarked that he is “on probation for failing several drug screens.” It appears that Sosa’s troubles began after elementary school. While in elementary school, Sosa held a 4.0 average and liked school, but sometime during middle school, he began to detest school, and his grades began to plummet. The likely culprit, according to Sosa—he began smoking marijuana near the end of middle school and has battled drugs since then.

Now a sophomore in high school, Sosa does not enjoy math class but likes his English class because he enjoys reading and writing. Specifically, he enjoys writing stories and reading Greek mythology or “something with a nice plot and story line.” Outside of school, Sosa likes to write raps, mostly about “stuff” he sees everyday—such as “gangs, guns, and drugs.” Sosa lives in a troubled neighborhood in town, an area known for its drugs and its violence—an area where Sosa would not dream of raising his own future children. Furthermore, he does not want his children to hear from others in the neighborhood about mistakes he made as a youngster. In words that underscore regret, he states, “If I could go back, I would change things. I would change a lot of stuff.” This sense of remorse seemingly colors his vision of his future. With

specific regard to plans for his future, Sosa states, “The only thing I got planned for my future is hoping I’m not dead or in jail.” His motto in life: “Live life to the fullest. You never know when you gonna die.”

DJ: DJ is sixteen years old and lives with his father, mother, and younger brother. He prides himself on being a role model for his younger brother and has a goal to make straight As in school this year. DJ lists among his hobbies playing video games, playing baseball, and studying. Contrary to the other participants, listening to music does not appeal to him, but he does enjoy reading. In fact, he admits that he sees reading as a way to improve his vocabulary so that he can “use more words.” His favorite book is *The Outsiders*. Presently a sophomore in high school, he appreciates English, especially reading, but “poetry, grammar, and revising and editing” are among his declared weaknesses. For his future plans, DJ hopes to meet Jesus, marry Taylor Swift, become president, and travel the world. Interestingly, interviews with DJ suggest a vague uncertainty about the future, with DJ stating, “I would like to see adulthood and my own child.” But these same interviews also hint at a young man with insight beyond his years. For example, during a focus interview, participants talked about gangstas, the image of a gangsta, and how many students at school claim to be gangstas. DJ boldly declared that he has seen “real” gangstas in Los Angeles and New Orleans; their peers claiming to be gangstas are merely imposters. In addition to these seemingly mature insights, DJ also prides himself on his compassion for others. A defining moment in his life occurred when he befriended a new student in middle school. He states, “He didn’t have any friends or no one to talk to. So I went up to him and talked to him, and he was actually a cool cat. I believe I changed his life and changed mine by not being afraid to be generous to strangers anymore.” The two are still friends today.

Tate: Tate is sixteen years old and lives with his mother, his sister, and his younger brother. His older brother was recently killed in a shooting. Sports represent one of his major hobbies, as he can often be found after school hours playing football or basketball or fishing. Presently a sophomore at the high school, Tate mentions English among his favorite subjects, but otherwise insists that school is boring. In fact, he plans to "opt out" of the core-four curriculum at the end of the present school year, putting himself on track for the career diploma instead. Regarding school as he presently knows it, he states, "Yeah, it's boring! You ain't got nothing else to do, so you clown." Such "clowning" has created trouble for Tate, who has known his share of school discipline. Interviews with Tate reveal a frustration with arbitrary rules and inconsistently applied consequences. He is seemingly aware of his skin color's influence on the sentences he receives, and this extends out of school to dealings with law enforcement, as well. Aside from staying out of trouble, his only goal for his sophomore year is "to pass all my classes so I can graduate." Unlike some of the participants who list the acquisition of material items as future goals, Tate's goals are somewhat different. While he does admit that becoming famous and making money are aspects of the good life, his greatest dreams revolve around his family. He will be happiest if he can purchase a house for his mother, take care of his family, and watch his little brother graduate from high school.

Bob: Bob is seventeen years old and currently lives with his mother, although he does have an older sister and brother. A firm believer in "God first, family second," Bob is most fearful of death and failing in life. Similar to the other participants, Bob views sports as a significant aspect of his life. He often spends his free time playing basketball in his neighborhood and hopes to make the school team this year. LeBron James is his favorite among basketball players, and Bob routinely watches *More Than a Game*, a documentary about James's

life. Sports carry over to his reading habits, as well. A self-professed "all-day sports fan," Bob really enjoys reading *Sports Illustrated* and often writes about sports in his English journal. Listening to music also figures into his daily routine, and he can often be found listening to songs by Lil' Wayne, Drake, and Lil' Boosie. To him, music is more than just something to occupy time. He believes "a lot of songs may explain how you feel in love, life, or the struggle." Bob can often be seen with his earphones on during idle times in class. An event in Bob's life that occurred four years ago has forever changed his life and his perspective on life. His half-brother witnessed the agonizing death of his father, "watching him take his last breath." Bob says that he watched his brother go through the difficult times without his father, which made his brother strive harder and eventually gain acceptance to UL. Experiencing his brother's successes, Bob believes, has made a significant impact on Bob's life, motivating him to try harder. He states, "He makes me look at life in a whole new way; no matter what, with hard work you can do anything in life."

The Novel Units

Two novel units (one using *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers and another using *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson) were conducted with Ms. Clark's two sophomore English classes. As she and I had been co-workers last year—her first year of teaching—I felt comfortable approaching her with my request to conduct my research with her classes. She had never used young adult novels in her teaching, but she was enthusiastic and excited about the novel units I proposed. We worked together throughout the first nine weeks of the school year to construct the units. The overarching theme for the novels would be "identity," and discussions, journals, and

projects would be geared toward exploring identity.[8] In addition, we decided that she would teach the units, enabling me to interact with the students, write field notes, and participate in class discussions. Novels would be read aloud in class so that everyone could experience them together in real time. In addition, reading response journals would be actively utilized to chart students' reactions to novel events and characters, as well as enable students to engage in conversation with the texts and, hopefully, construct new experiences through their interactions.

Novel units began in late November 2012, the first being *Monster* and the second being *The First Part Last*. I chose *Monster* because I had read it with my own sophomore English classes the previous school year, and students absolutely loved it. Discussions were rich, students were engaged, and many of them spoke of the real-life connections they had realized with the novel. In the present context of Ms. Clark's classes, I felt that the high-interest plot, as well as the format in which the text is written (as a play), might encourage quality discussions and pique student interest. I selected *The First Part Last* for its potential to engage students in discussions regarding manhood. As the novel tells the story of an African American teenage boy and his grappling with becoming a teen father, I thought the story line could open spaces to examine various cultural assumptions defining the ideal man and father. Before I provide details about each novel unit, however, I give a brief overview of the novels, detailing their themes, main characters, and plot.

[8] I discuss this theme later in my findings chapter. However, I must note here that the theme of identity proved to be quite powerful for the students in these two classes. Upon completion of the first month of the novel unit, students were writing letters to Ms. Clark, saying that they "had never opened up like this before" in any of their classes, that the discussions and activities they were doing were very powerful. In one particular class discussion, several students began crying as they shared events from their own lives.

Overview of *Monster*

Monster, written by Walter Dean Myers, tells the story of Steve, a sixteen-year-old African American boy from Harlem, New York who is on trial for murder. Specifically, he is accused of acting as the lookout in a robbery that led to the death of a drugstore owner. However, the story line does not make clear whether Steve really did rob the store or help the criminals in the process. Written from Steve's perspective, the novel is presented in the form of a screenplay and journal entries composed by Steve as he awaits trial and the possibility of spending the rest of his life behind bars. The novel's title, *Monster,* is a reference to what the prosecutor calls him in court and becomes significant throughout the novel as Steve battles with his identity.

The main thread of the story's plot is Steve's time in prison and his experiences in the courtroom throughout his trial. Interwoven with the main story line are: Steve's screenplay, wherein Steve reports the events from his trial; and Steve's journal entries, which provide background information about Steve's life prior to the drug store robbery, as well as introspection from Steve regarding his present experiences.

The information Steve provides through his screenplay gives a detailed account of his trial, recounting the robbery from planning stages through its execution phase, as told by various witnesses. For example, the proceedings from the trial reveal, through witnesses, the original plan the boys created to carry out the robbery. Specifically, the group decided that Steve would check the drugstore for police or customers, signaling if the store was clear; two others, King and Bobo, would actually rob Mr. Nesbitt, the drugstore owner; and another, Osvaldo, would hinder anyone who attempted to chase them. These details of the crime, in addition to the witnesses' testimonies, are central to understanding the novel's plot. But what becomes more significant throughout the reporting of the trial proceedings, however, is the transforming of Steve's

identity, one of the overarching themes of the novel. The deeper significance of the novel lies in the impact of the proceedings on Steve's identity, on how Steve perceives himself as a result of learning how other individuals perceive him.

Aside from the screenplay, the other format through which the novel is told is Steve's journal entries. The powerful role of the journal entries is the rich introspection they provide into Steve's innermost thoughts. It is here that Steve describes his struggles, fears, hopes, and regrets as he battles with determining who he is. Whereas the transformation occurring within Steve throughout his trial is covered more objectively through the screenplay sections, it is unpacked more subjectively through Steve's own intimate thoughts showcased in these journal entry sections. The reader can fully sense his innermost struggles as he negotiates the tensions he experiences between who he knows himself to be and who others think he is—the real human being he knows versus the stereotyped "monster" others assume they know.

The combination of these different accounts of Steve's experiences provides the reader a more complex view of Steve's identity and a better understanding of the multiple forces seeking to influence his identity. Steve's search for identity and the novel's attention to identity as a central theme are what make this novel particularly powerful for young people, many of whom struggle with their own identity formations. The novel's ending, in fact, represents this continuing struggle, as it leaves Steve's innocence in question, not fully completing the answer to "who am I?"

Overview of *The First Part Last*

The First Part Last, by Angela Johnson, tells the story of Bobby, a bright, sixteen-year-old African American male and aspiring artist who learns on his sixteenth birthday that he will be a father. His girlfriend Nia is pregnant, and life as they both know it will change forever. Told

through Bobby's perspective in alternating "then" and "now" chapters (or past and present events), the plot highlights Bobby's grappling with a permanent change in his own life. While the reader does not know the reason for Nia's absence in the present, the story line revolves around Bobby caring for baby Feather and tending to other parenting tasks, in addition to negotiating roles as parent and student simultaneously—all the while still trying to figure out his own identity. In the end, the reader eventually discovers the story behind Nia's pregnancy, her unfortunate situation, and the outcome that led to Bobby's present reality.

At the start of the novel, Bobby seems like an ordinary sixteen-year-old boy. Instead of going to school on his birthday, he decides to ditch school and go for pizza with a few of his buddies. The boys view a movie, throw popcorn at each other, and go to the top of the Empire State Building—all scenes that highlight Bobby's carefree life as a kid himself. His life changes that night when Nia, his girlfriend, reveals she is pregnant with their child. Because of the framework in which the story is told (alternating "then" and "now"), the reader is immediately introduced to the grueling life Bobby suddenly has entered as a new parent. Though living with his parents, Bobby assumes the care for his daughter—diaper changes, middle-of-the-night feedings, and subway rides before school each morning to take her to the sitter. While Bobby is depicted as a mostly responsible young man throughout the story, the reader does see occasional signs of his struggle to suppress his childish state in a situation of forced maturity. For instance, one morning, Bobby is running late for school, and Feather throws up on him. Rather than rush to get Feather to the sitter and then himself to school, he opts to leave the baby with Coco, his neighbor downstairs. Feeling a new sense of freedom, he spray paints a wall and is subsequently arrested. No one knows where he is, and his baby is still with the neighbor. In the end, Bobby is

forced to reckon with his parents, humbly admit his mistake, and continue to grapple with his changing identity.

More than anything, the novel concerns a young man's search for his identity. It is a poignant, moving tale of a boy's coming of age and his intense struggle to reconcile who he was with who he is now, forever changed in one moment. The tale does not attempt to preach about teen pregnancy nor take a self-righteous stance on making wrong decisions. Rather, the issue is explored open-endedly through Bobby's experiences, his eventual acceptance of responsibility, and his evolving identity. Finally, the novel's tender depictions of Bobby's relationships with his girlfriend, his parents, and his new baby encourage the reader to deeply connect with Bobby and intimately feel his struggles.

The Novel Units

Ms. Clark's classes spent five weeks with *Monster*, completing the unit before the Christmas break. As I stated previously, the novel was read aloud in class, with students volunteering to read the various roles. In addition to the anticipated privilege of experiencing the novel together with the students, the decision to read the novel in class was accompanied by other unexpected benefits. For example, on most days, students challenged each other for roles, having spirited exchanges over who would be the better person for the character. In addition, students began to complain when, on certain days, Ms. Clark informed them that they would not be reading the novel that day. And still on other days, students reading aloud were spontaneously motivated to rise and walk about the classroom as they spoke their lines, one male student angrily pounding his fist on the podium as he delivered the lines of an attorney in the trial. These experiences with the novel, along with the supplementary activities we planned, were designed to genuinely engage students in the novel unit.

To begin the novel unit, Ms. Clark performed several pre-reading activities to motivate student interest in the novel, as well as assess students' prior experiences with the novel's themes. The teacher began with a "guided imagery" activity; she read a scene aloud from the novel—a scene in which the main character describes prison life—and had students close their eyes during the reading. Following the read aloud, students were asked to respond in their journals to a series of reading response prompts. Students then shared responses, first in their groups and then whole class. In another pre-reading activity, students completed an anticipation guide requiring students to consider their stances on several of the novel's central themes, such as assumption of guilt, peer pressure, discrimination, and racism. Responses were shared and discussed.

In addition, daily journal prompts followed throughout the readings, some consisting of questions relevant to specific passages or themes, others requiring students to compose a double-column response—listing a passage of their choice on one side of the page, their reflection on the other. The goal was to have students writing continually and in dialogue with the text.

One particular activity students enjoyed involved a project they completed in the computer lab. Titled "Your Current Identity," the assignment required students to craft representations of their current identities, to include: a list of three famous quotes representative of the student's world view or meaning of life in general, along with an explanation; a personal playlist that included three songs the student found meaningful, along with an explanation; one appropriate picture that represented how the student felt about himself/herself or life in general, along with an explanation; and, finally, a "bucket list" of ten things the student wished to accomplish in life.

Other activities included the "body biography," where students worked in groups to depict their chosen character's thoughts, feelings, and motivations; a web diagram (graphic organizer), which required groups of students to analyze Steve's struggles with his identity (center circle) on four fronts (outer circles): the challenges he faced, the outer forces attempting to define him, the life events impacted his perceived identity, and the resolution (whether students felt he knew who he was); a bio-poem, where students created a poem detailing aspects of their own perceived identities; and a final essay, which required students to synthesize and analyze character traits and thematic elements from the novel.

Classes began reading *The First Part Last* upon their return from the Christmas holidays and spent about four weeks completing the entire unit. Pre-reading activities, designed to gauge students' sentiments on manhood and fatherhood, consisted of questions about boys versus men and fatherhood, more generally. For one activity, students worked in groups to complete a graphic organizer contrasting boys with men. The organizer solicited students' idea about how boys compare with men in various ways: how they act, how they dress, what they like, how they talk, and what they regard as important. Follow-up questions asked: What is the difference between a boy and a man (not in the physical sense)? What does it mean to be a "real" man? What does it mean to be an African American man? For the second pre-reading activity, students worked in groups to discuss and answer questions about fatherhood. Specifically, questions asked: What words come to your mind when you hear the word "father"? What should a father's most important responsibilities be? Can a mother be a father? Why or why not? What makes a good father different from a not-so-good father? Explain. Does a child necessarily need a father? Why or why not?

After several chapters of reading and a thorough introduction to the novel's themes, Ms. Clark showed students a video for a Lil' Wayne song and asked them to respond in their journals. Since we knew many students listened to Lil' Wayne's music and identified with his lyrics, we considered the video a powerful way to help students explore the role that choices play in raising a child. Entitled "How to Love" by Lil' Wayne, the video begins with a young mother who, finding out she is pregnant, decides to keep the baby, even though her lover is abusive. The daughter grows up in this negative environment, and the effects of these experiences on her own life manifest themselves in her subsequent life choices: becoming a stripper, selling herself through prostitution, and later, contracting HIV. The video then rewinds, reworking these same events through a more positive lens. This time, the young mother stays with family and eventually marries a respectable guy. Her daughter grows up nurtured in a loving environment and, contrary to the previous version, goes to school, earns her degree, and finds an upstanding young man. More importantly, she gains a sense of self-respect and learns how to love herself and others. Journaling and class discussions followed the viewing of the video, and thematic connections were made to the novel.

As with *Monster*, the students and Ms. Clark read aloud from the novel, stopping at pre-selected points for class discussions and reader response journaling. Again, the goal was to encourage students to remain in constant dialogue with the text—predicting, confirming, and relating story events with their own lives and creating new experiences as a result.

To culminate the novel units, we decided upon a two-part final activity designed to encourage students to think specifically about their own identities after having examined characters' identities from the novel. Day one was the "bookmark" activity, designed to motivate students to consider positive aspects of other students' identities, as well as explore positive self-

image as illuminated through peer perspectives. To initiate this activity, we brought in blank bookmarks, one for each student. After we oriented students about proper procedures for completing the activity, we gave students bookmarks and told them to write their names on the bookmarks. We then directed the class to pass their bookmarks to the next student. Students were then instructed to write one positive comment about the individual whose bookmark they held. The activity continued in this fashion until all students had written on each bookmark. Day two involved the "I Am Me" activity. Taking a large section of paper from a roll, Ms. Clark wrote the words "I Am Me" in the center. Students were then asked to contribute descriptors of their own identities to the sheet. Time was given at the end for students to read through classmates' posts. The completed activity was then displayed in the hallway, and students were asked to write a reflection on both experiences.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research design of this dissertation project, discussing my methods of data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, and limitations. In addition, I have also provided an overview of the novels, novel units, activities, and rationale for selected activities. In chapter four, I detail my findings, drawing from my field notes and interviews, as well as explore connections with relevant theory.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

This study took place at Bayou Central High School during the 2012-2013 school year. Participants included eleven African American males enrolled in Ms. Clark's second and third period English II classes. I collected data throughout two young adult novel units and included classroom observations, interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and student work samples. I conducted classroom observations two to three times per week for a period of four months. Field notes I took during the observations focused on participants' interactions with each other, with other students, with the teacher, and with the texts. In addition, I administered two pre-study questionnaires and reissued them in the post-study period. The focus of one questionnaire was participants' views on reading, schooling, and literacy. The other questionnaire concerned participants' views on identity formation, including those aspects of their lives they deemed most important to their identities. Finally, I interviewed each participant once individually and then again as part of a focus group.

Throughout the data collection process, I transcribed my field notes and interviews then read through the data to look for emerging themes. After examining collected data, I used the constant-comparative method (Yin, 2011) to group participants' responses into thematic areas based on commonalities among participants' answers, as well as connections made throughout the interviews. This process involved my reading through the data several times, noting similarities among participants' experiences. I then grouped data into themes, continually reading and rereading to check for emerging themes. Themes I ultimately devised from the data include: coping with life changes; African American male identities; interactions with police; the power of sports; rap and artwork as forms of escape; perspectives on schooling, teachers, and

literacies; negotiating school discipline; participants' connections to young adult literature; and perceptions of manhood and fatherhood.

As I stated in the introduction, I devised the idea for my project from my experiences with African American male students, both in my previous roles as teacher and administrator, and most recently, as a researcher. Through these experiences, I became interested in studying the ways African American adolescent males construct their identities through their interactions with formal schooling. More specifically, using my experiences as a former English teacher, I wished to focus on how young adult literature might be used to explore the ways these young men construct their identities. Since young adult novels, with their propensity for issues relevant to teens (Bean & Moni, 2003), offer opportune spaces for investigating teen identities, I wished to find out how participants might interact with these texts to construct new experiences and portray their unique identities. The questions this research explores are: How can two young adult novel units be used to engage participants in exploring their identities? What do the voices and texts of participants suggest about the ways African American adolescent males construct their identities? What do the voices and texts of participants suggest about the ways African American adolescent males view schooling and formal literacy?

The Study

As I stated earlier, this study occurred at Bayou Central High School, where I recently served as teacher and then administrator. My work with African American males, both in the English classroom and in the administrative office, provided the inspiration for engaging in this research. At the beginning of the school year, I approached Ms. Clark about conducting my research with her classes. Ms. Clark and I had been coworkers during my employment at the high school, and I had served, albeit unofficially, as her mentor throughout her first year of

teaching. As she and I already had an established rapport, it proved easy to approach her with my research ambitions. Upon further explanations of my research and what the study would involve, Ms. Clark excitedly consented to participating with her classes. As she taught both English II and English III courses, we had to decide which classes would be best suited for the study. Given my anticipated use of young adult novels, recent passage of state accountability measures, and a newer teacher operating under this framework, I decided the English II classes would be the best fit for my study. Ms. Clark's teaching schedule contained two English II classes, one at second period and another at third period. There were six African American males enrolled at second period with five enrolled at third period. Ms. Clark's consent, however, would not be the only consent I had to obtain in order to conduct the study at the high school. Upon securing arrangements with her, I proceeded to the administrative offices to seek the approval of the principal for my study.

Having worked with the school's administrative team for several years, I was no stranger to its members, their personalities, or their workings. In fact, the principal (who had been an assistant principal during my employment) and I had had rather tumultuous encounters, particularly when he had mocked my scholarly ambitions. That said, however, a mutual sense of outward respect prevailed, and I excitedly approached him with my request to conduct my research at his school. Consent was quickly granted with the final words, "Do whatcha gotta do." As I had worked there recently, I was also afforded easier access to the school and more freedom to move about the school, as opposed to what might be required of an outsider. For example, I was not required to sign in at the office; I was allowed into the faculty lounge; and I was allowed general access to administrative offices, which became significant when I needed to ask permission to retrieve a participant from another classroom or from the ISS (in-school

suspension) room. Furthermore, my recent employment there also meant I was not viewed as an outsider by faculty or students, and, as such, was not met with stares or suspicions about my purpose there.

With my groundwork complete, the next step in the process was to work with Ms. Clark to develop our novel units—selecting novels, planning activities, and deciding upon the roles we would play throughout the units. Several young adult novels were considered for the units, such as *Tears of a Tiger* (Sharon Draper), *Forged by Fire* (Draper), and *Scorpions* (Walter Dean Myers). Ultimately, we selected *Monster* (Myers) and *The First Part Last* (Angela Johnson). We chose these because both novels involve African American males as main characters and contain themes I thought might be relevant to African American adolescent males. Such relevance would be essential to exploring participants' identities through the readings and discussions of the novels.

In addition to the reading and discussions of the novels, which would take place during class, we also decided to incorporate reading response journals to chronicle participants' meaning making with the texts (Rosenblatt, 1995). Teacher-generated journal prompts would be used daily throughout the readings of both novels to provide a platform for participants' responses. Furthermore, in addition to including journals, we planned several activities for each novel, activities that would help students explore their identities in connection with the novels, as well as assist them in drawing personal connections to themes in the novels. As I explained in the previous chapter, these activities included a personal writing assignment about a pivotal event in students' lives; a computer lab project on identity, which required students to develop a bucket list of ten things they would like to accomplish, as well as a playlist of songs applicable to their lives with a rationale for songs selected; a bookmark activity in which students wrote positive

comments on other students' book marks; a body biography activity, where groups of students illustrated different emotions and thoughts for Steve (main character in *Monster*); and a concluding "I Am Me" mural that provided spaces for students to display and illustrate key components of their identities.

In planning the units, we also determined the specific roles we would play throughout the teaching of the units. As the researcher, I wanted to interact with participants as much as possible yet also have the opportunity to observe and write field notes. In addition, I did not think the high-stakes, value-added teaching environment in which Ms. Clark taught would be conducive to my acting in a role that was in any way intrusive. Therefore, it was decided that Ms. Clark would present and teach the units while I would act in the capacity of the participant observer (Amit, 2000; O'Reilly, 2009). In other words, I would not actually teach the units to students but, rather, interact with students and participate with them in discussions and activities.

With the novel units planned, we decided to begin the first novel unit the week before Thanksgiving break. This timeline would provide ample time for the classes to read the first novel, *Monster*, together and complete the accompanying activities prior to Christmas break. The reading of the second novel, *The First Part Last*, would begin upon students' return in January. In the meantime, I would spend the first several weeks of the school year finalizing my research instruments, conducting preliminary observations of Ms. Clark's two classes, and securing signed permission forms from the participants.

Beginnings

I must digress for one moment to provide more information about Ms. Clark, as such insight about the teacher may yield better understanding of this research and the classroom environment within which it occurred. During this school year, Ms. Clark was entering her first

full year of teaching. In the previous school year, she had completed her student teaching at this school in the fall semester and then was hired on as faculty in the spring. At the time of this first semester as faculty, she was assigned to a classroom near mine, and she often sought my advice and insights on various teaching matters. This first semester appeared difficult for her, both because of her new teacher status and because she had been assigned to teach seniors. As Ms. Clark was 22 years old and considered by students to be quite attractive, she sometimes appeared to have difficulty establishing her role as teacher and authority in the classroom. Many of her seniors viewed her more as friend than teacher, sometimes leading to classroom management issues. As a result, she often appeared discouraged, despondent, and, at other times, panicked. On the positive side, however, students came to know a very caring, inspiring, enthusiastic, hardworking teacher. In fact, she later would be identified by school administrators as a prime candidate for the "Capturing Kids' Hearts" training, a program focused on relationship building in the classroom. Students appeared to relate well to her, and they often wrote her notes attesting to her impacts on their lives. Her classroom walls were adorned with student photos taken at school dances, a testament to the closeness students felt with her. Working to establish herself as a new teacher, though, Ms. Clark continually negotiated various identities within the broader role of teacher. But it was her ability to reach and inspire her students that, I felt, made her the ideal teacher with which to work on this project. The classroom environment she established would be most conducive to rich student conversations, student-teacher interaction, and valuable moments of spontaneity.

As the classroom dynamics do not operate in isolation, a brief description of the school environment is also necessary. This study occurred during the first year of implementation of education reform measures mandated by the state. It is beyond the scope of this research to delve

into a lengthy discussion of value-added school performance measures, Compass teacher observation instruments, or the Common Core State Standards. But all of these accountability instruments were implemented during this school year, and one of the impacts of this implementation was a very palpable air of tension at the school. Administrators had implemented random classroom observations, termed "24/7s," informing teachers to expect that, at any time, someone could put a key in their classroom door and enter unannounced to conduct an observation. Furthermore, under Compass, the new evaluation instrument, teachers would be observed and evaluated for effectiveness on a 1-4 scale, leading to added anxiety and competition among teachers as they communicated their scores to each other. My purpose in providing these details is because these reform measures contributed to a state of hyper-vigilance among teachers, a pervasive feeling that they were being watched and that, at any moment, someone could be in their classrooms scrutinizing, scoring, and rating. And in the new, high-stakes, value-added environment, these ratings had become much more significant. As my field notes would later document, Ms. Clark's classroom would not escape these influences, either. On one occasion, Ms. Clark reported that she had been so nervous about her impending observation that she had spilled her water all over the classroom set of novels. On another day, she cried after receiving an "emerging" rating from the administrator who observed her class. And, on yet another occasion, the principal told teachers that pursuing their masters degrees was no longer valuable, as salary hikes associated with the degree were being eliminated across the district. The point to be made here, again, is that this study was conducted in a volatile, tension-filled environment, influencing the decisions we made about novels and their accompanying activities. Having detailed the classroom and school dynamics, I now turn to the early stages of the study.

I first met the participants when I conducted my first observation of Ms. Clark's two classes in October. The purpose of my initial observations was to survey the classroom environment; note the presence of various texts in the classroom; observe participants' interactions with each other, their classmates, and their teacher; and begin to interact with and establish rapport with participants. My presence in the classroom during these early stages was essential, both for documenting my initial impressions and for making my daily presence in the classroom more natural to students.

I noted during these first observations the relationship Ms. Clark had with her students, as well as her teaching style. In her interactions with students, she projected an easy-going, approachable demeanor. I could tell that students felt comfortable talking to her, and this sense of ease pervaded the classroom, as well. This is not to say that Ms. Clark had no worries or did not feel the pressures associated with her working environment. Rather, she was able to exude this calmness with her students, creating a hospitable, non-threatening classroom atmosphere. In addition, Ms. Clark established daily her expectations for students' conduct, specifically traits of what she considered good character, such as using manners, treating each other with respect, and accepting each other's differences. These common understandings helped to foster a sense of community and encouraged students to share their voices.

After several early observations, Ms. Clark formally introduced me to her students and clarified the purpose of my presence. In addition, I spoke briefly to students about my research and what I would be doing there for the next several months. We also used this opportunity to generate interest in the novel units, getting students excited about the novels they would read and the activities they would complete. Likewise, we emphasized the personal connections the novels might offer, as well as the opportunities for working collaboratively with their peers.

Furthermore, I met with participants at the end of the class period and invited them to be part of my research study. All eleven African American males consented and were given permission forms for participation in the study. I also further explained the purpose of my research, as well as the kinds of data I would be collecting, clarifying their roles in the project. With the foundation for the study complete, the next phase of the project would be the novel units themselves. Before I detail the happenings of the classroom scene throughout these novel units, I must explore data gathered from participants about their out-of-school literacies (Hull & Schultz, 2002) and other insights regarding their lives outside of school. Such insights will illuminate participants' connections (or lack thereof) to the novels, as well as classroom events that occurred throughout the novel units.

Participants' Lives Outside of School

This research recognizes that participants' out-of-school experiences—those aspects of their lives occurring out of the boundaries of school, the school day, and its institutionally recognized forms of literacy—shape their experiences with formal literacy. Exploring participants' lives with this understanding acknowledges a "multiple literacies" (Gee, 2009) approach, valuing a broader definition of literacy outside the parameters of formal schooling. Consequently, I sought to better understand participants' lives outside of school, ultimately bringing these understandings to bear upon participants' lives in school. In the next several sections, I detail the ethnographic themes I constructed for students' out-of-school lives: coping with life changes; socially-situated African American male identities; interactions with police; the power of sports; and rap and artwork as forms of escape.

Resilience: Better for the Change

Interviews with participants brought out a glaring commonality among them. Life's events have prompted some sort of change for participants. Many of them reported something occurring that influenced their views about life and themselves. For example, some participants experienced early in life the separation of their parents or the death of a parent, leaving them to live with a single parent or a grandparent. Others battled bullying throughout elementary school and middle school, mostly for their lack of height or size. Even more disturbing, several of the participants lost a sibling or loved one to gun violence—one participant actually witnessing the shooting of his brother, who later collapsed and died on the sidewalk behind him. Much like a soldier's battle scars, some of the boys carry with them daily reminders of their lost loved ones in the form of tattoos, most inscribed with the name or initials of their deceased. Other participants have encountered social challenges, particularly bullying throughout elementary and middle school. Interestingly, however, these events provide spaces for resilience. Many of the participants said they draw upon these unfortunate events for strength and inspiration, working harder and achieving more in remembrance of those lost.

For Jay, life was forever changed when he was still a young boy and was wrongly accused of setting fire to his house. Years after the incident, Jay still identifies with people who are wrongly accused. Insight into this tragedy came when I asked him about connections he felt to the novel *Monster*, a young adult novel in which the main character is accused of committing a crime he may not have committed. When I asked Jay his thoughts on the novel, he said:

> It really relate to me and how you can be accused of something that you didn't even do. One time, all right, my house got set on fire, and it wasn't me, but they blamed me 'cause I had the matchbox in my hand, and it was my little brother, and he had it in his hand, and he burned it, and it dropped.

The family's home was soon engulfed in flames, and everything was lost. Not long afterwards, Jay experienced his grandmother's death. Jay said that, before her death, he had "all As and Bs for first through fifth grades." But he said, "My grandma died; after that, everything started going downhill." Jay still considers this event a major contributor to his declining academic performance. Perhaps the biggest test of Jay's fortitude came just this year when he learned his girlfriend was expecting their child. Coincidently, our second young adult novel selection, *The First Part Last,* centers on this very issue with which Jay grappled—an African American teen becoming a father. In our interview, I asked him about his becoming a father and how the experience has impacted his life. Jay said:

> Like, it, it really make me do everything, like, try harder in everything I do. Like, like, I wanna do everything for her (his baby), give her everything. So that push me to really go out there and get it, like finish school. It really, like, open up my eyes and make me really see how life should really be and what I should do and what I should not do.

I could tell from our interviews that Jay outwardly recognized the value of completing school. He seemed to subscribe to the belief that a high school diploma was the key to a better life for him. And with a baby now in his life, it was evident that his desire to finish school was accompanied by a greater sense of urgency.

For other participants, life's changes were caused by even more catastrophic events. During our interviews, John spoke of his older brother, who always wanted to be a "gangsta," ultimately becoming involved in drug activity. John witnessed his brother being gunned down at a neighborhood park and later watched him die on the sidewalk behind him. To John, his brother had been his role model, and John had assumed he would follow in his footsteps. This experience led to intensive soul searching for John, as he reflected on his brother's lifestyle, eventually turning against the lifestyle his brother had represented. In one of his journal entries, he wrote about this experience: "One thing that changed me was when my brother got killed. It was really

tough. I had to see my mom cry every day. I had to see my brother get put six feet under. It was tough. I still think about it today."

Admirably, while this tragedy greatly impacted John's life, it does not appear to define him, make him bitter, or function as an excuse for underachievement. In fact, his brother's unfortunate death discourages John from embarking on a similar path as his brother's. John told me that he has since moved out of this neighborhood and into a home with his grandmother in another neighborhood. But it is evident that the memory still haunts him, and he writes many of his English journal assignments about his brother. Two tattoos[9] on John's arm honor his fallen brother's memory: one with his brother's initials and another with the number 17, the age at which his brother died. The following originates from a journal entry John wrote during the *Monster* novel unit:

> One moment that changed my life was when I witnessed my brother get killed. Before he died, he was laying there and told me to chase my dreams. Most people ask me why I didn't give up and become a gangsta. The answer is because I refuse to let him down. That year for pee-wee football, I scored twenty-two touchdowns in an eight-game season. Every time I score, I show tribute to him. In middle school, I had twenty touchdowns in ten games. When I go take a shower, I turn off all the lights and think about him and what strives me. Heading into my junior season, I'm looking for at least eight touchdowns for varsity. Every day after school, I go lift weights while my friends are smoking weed and chasing girls. One day, I'm gonna make it and give back to my mom and keep my promise to my brother. He is what strives me and made me into who I am.

While the tragic loss of his brother essentially could have provided a legitimate excuse for John to abandon his career goals, I saw a steadfast young man dedicated to honoring his family. Through John's interview and classroom observations, I came to know a young man who had been dealt a severe blow but who had emerged stronger from the experience. In John's mind,

[9] Kirkland's (2009) ethnographic study of six urban adolescent black males discusses tattoos as "literacy artifacts," used by participants to make meaning of their lives through an alternate form of literacy. Participants used tattoos as "an opportunity to comment on one's realities through a symbol system that uses more than words" (p. 376).

the negative experience of his brother's death had brought about the positive in his present life—a spirit of perseverance and determination inspired by the memory of his brother.

In a different interview, I gained insight about Dee's life altering change. Dee lost his father to heart disease when Dee was nine years old. Among other changes that resulted from this misfortune, Dee's mother eventually remarried, introducing a new male figure into Dee's life. Whereas these circumstances may well have negatively impacted Dee's attitude, and whereas the tragedy of his father's death was difficult to accept, Dee appears to gain strength and inspiration from his father's memory. In a journal entry, Dee wrote about this experience: "A thing that changed me over my life is when my dad passed away. I changed a lot over the time he been dead. I been doing things better now than before he died. I also been helping out my mom. Also I help my little sister and brother with growing up."

In a way similar to John's reaction to his brother's death, Dee acknowledged that he uses this tragedy from his past as a point of personal inspiration and motivation in his present. In refusing to allow the event to define him as a person, Dee essentially takes on an active role in forming his identity. As opposed to passively allowing another force to define him, Dee appeared to demonstrate a sense of agency (Murrell, 2008) in determining the person he would become.

Much like John and Dee's experiences with the death of a loved one, Ray spoke in our interview about recently losing his father to heart problems. As though attempting to negate any assumptions surrounding teen boys in such circumstances, Ray attested to his improved behavior following his loss. In an interview, I asked him to describe his experiences with school. He said, "Well, good and bad. I was in trouble a lot, like for talking a lot and crazy stuff. But ever since my dad died—he was ill for a while with heart problems—I don't get in as much trouble."

Similar to other participants, Ray appeared to have a sense of resilience, an understanding that the tough times can make a person come back stronger. In speaking with these participants, I noticed that they seemed to emerge from tumultuous life events with stronger resolve and an inspiration to be better people in honor of their lost loved ones. Common among them was a refusal, even if unconsciously, to allow the circumstances to define them.

An interview with Sosa provided a glimpse at life changes brought about by a multitude of hardships. In his interview, he told me about his grandmother raising him after his father died (his mother was in and out of jail). Soon thereafter, Sosa began to struggle during middle school when he began doing drugs. He had exemplary academic performance in elementary school, he said, but then began a steady decline in early middle school, and, ultimately, a sharp drop toward late middle school. Sosa spoke in an interview about his academic challenges:

> When I was in elementary school, I used to have a 4.0. In middle school, I was still good, but I started hating school. I started smoking (marijuana), but I was still coming to school. I don't think I really changed; I do some stuff I wouldn't have did back then.

Contrary to his outward nonchalance regarding his drug use, the beginnings of Sosa's drug use actually signified the start of more serious trouble—run-ins with the law. As later thematic strands will detail, Sosa began the school year with a newly-acquired ankle monitoring bracelet for his alleged role in an armed robbery. However, this was not his first experience with the criminal justice system, as prior drug convictions had already provided his first taste of the system. The magnitude of these struggles was not completely lost on Sosa, though, despite his "cool pose" (Majors & Billson, 1992), an attempt to project outwardly an image of coolness or aloofness. A conversation later in the interview indicated a somber sense of regret.

> I wouldn't want my kids seeing all of that, hearing about the stuff I did, or hearing about the stuff I did in the past and stuff like that. 'Cause people make mistakes. If I could go

> back, I would change things; I would change a lot of stuff (long pause)…If I could go back in the past and stop me from smokin' that first weed, I'd change that, too.

Unlike the life altering events other participants discussed in interviews, Sosa's life change did not appear accompanied by a renewed sense of purpose or a motivation to succeed. Sosa's drug use seemed too difficult for him to overcome, and I think that, in his moments of extreme discouragement, he simply gave up. Rather than work to cast off his reputation as a "weed smoker," he appeared to embrace it. In one particular example, Ms. Clark asked the class what they enjoyed most about their Thanksgiving break. Sosa's response was that he "did not have his usual appetite for Thanksgiving dinner" since he "stopped smoking weed." In another example, for one of the items on his "bucket list" (identity assignment in computer lab), Sosa wrote that he wants to "work for the legalization of marijuana."

As the responses from these participants suggest, many of their lives have been impacted by a moment of significant change. Whether they lost a loved one or made irresponsible choices, these events represent key opportunities for examining intersections of personal identity with life events. How participants reacted to and ultimately dealt with these tragedies provide insight into their sense of self, their sense of agency, and their resilience.

African American Male Identities

I asked participants, through interviews and in class discussions and activities, their views on African American people, generally, and African American males, more specifically. Since both young adult novels that students read contained African American males as main characters, discussions surrounding the novel naturally led to broader conversations about African American culture, norms, expectations, and behaviors. As might be expected, discussions indicated that participants did not share identical perspectives on the defining and critiquing of African American males. Other findings regarding participants' views on African American male

identities include: a belief that African Americans are perceived in a certain manner and some evidence of an attempt to disassociate from the group's identity or stereotypes associated with the group; a sense of a common struggle among African American people; mistrust of the police, who are often seen as prejudiced and inclined to misuse their powers; a sense that school rules are arbitrary, inconsistently applied, and biased against African Americans; and an admission that, despite barriers they must overcome, African Americans can succeed through hard work and determination.

I asked participants in interviews and surveys for their views on African Americans, generally, and African American males, specifically. Responses suggest participants are aware of assumptions and stereotypes surrounding African Americans, claim to have encountered difficulties attributable to the color of their skin, but believe African Americans can overcome their hardships through a determined attitude. When I interviewed Sosa, he conveyed an insistence that, despite commonly held societal assumptions and stereotypes, African American males are similar to boys of other races and should be treated similarly. His tone underscored his apparent frustration with these ingrained assumptions, as well as prior experiences surrounding racism. When I asked Sosa about his personal experiences with racism and stereotypes, he said, "We the same as everybody else, bro. Just because we black don't mean we go out and sell drugs, don't mean we go out there and kill people and stuff like that. We the same as everybody else."

Conversations with participants also underscore participants' awareness that broader societal stereotypes and assumptions about African American males permeate the school setting, as well[10]. John's interview highlights his belief that assumptions and stereotypes guide school

[10] Numerous scholars have noted the presence of ingrained societal assumptions and stereotypes regarding African American males (see Drake, 1987; Hudley & Graham, 2001; Krueger, 1996).

staff to prejudge African Americans at the school. When I asked John about experiences he has encountered with stereotypes in school, he said, "African American males in this school—people assume things. They see them walkin' around together and assume they gangstas, just because they walkin' together in a group or somethin'." John's response suggests an awareness that his being black presents an initial hurdle he must overcome prior to beginning any endeavor. Simply put, he appears to acknowledge that his blackness means he must work harder, struggle more, and overcome additional barriers to make the same gains as people of other races.

Whereas John proclaimed the presence of racist ideologies in the broadest sense within the school, Jay's interview responses focused specifically on the workings of racial bias in school discipline. When I asked Jay about whether or not school is fair for African American boys, he said, "Yeah. Everybody get treated the same way." But when I followed with another question: "As other African American boys? Or as white boys do?," he seemed to provide a somewhat different answer. He said, "It's like a little bit of both. It, like, we be treated like, like we white boys, but, like, when it come down to somethin', like somethin' major, it probably change a little bit. 'Cause they'll probably think 'since he black, yeah, he did that." I then asked, "Do you think there's a greater burden or a greater assumption people have that just because you're black, that you are probably guilty, that you have to overcome that?" Jay stated, "Yeah." I found it strange that Jay's response would initially acknowledge the presence of equal treatment of African American males at the school and then reverse to suggest underlying negative assumptions held by the school community about African American males. I wondered if his first response represented his attempt to censor his answers, to perhaps portray a certain image or provide me responses he thought I wanted to hear.

My interviews with other participants, Vinny and Al, explored more deeply the boys' thoughts about why people are quick to stereotype African American males. Vinny immediately referenced jail as a reason the general public holds negative assumptions about African American males. When I asked him to explain further, Vinny said, "That's another thing I think why people are really stereotyped about black men. Because if you really pay attention and look at the populations in the pen, in jail, prisons, correctional facilities—it's full of black people!" I found this statement by Vinny to be loaded with meaning. It seemed that in his response here, he was not critiquing the broader public for its prejudice, ill-informed assumptions, or perpetuation of stereotypes. Rather, he was stating a simple observation—that the prisons are populated mostly by African Americans. His reply likewise appeared to legitimize the stocking of prisons with African Americans, as though the reason people hold negative opinions about his race is because people of his race do those things that cause them to be put in jail.

Another participant's response to Vinny's statement provided additional insight into the complex dynamics of the boys' identities. Upon hearing Vinny's statement about the blacks in jail, Al came to their defense, seeking to justify their presence in the jails. Al stated:

> They ain't got no other choice. Like, the ones that sell drugs, for instance. They probably poor, and they wanna give support to their family, try to, like, raise their brother. And they go and sell drugs just to help 'em out. Then they get caught. Then they go to jail. And they start stereotyping, saying like, "He bad! Why would he sell drugs?"

In contrast to Vinny's more self-righteous stance on those African Americans in jail, Al's response highlights his understanding of the workings of racial stereotyping and conveys a sense of sympathy toward those who end up as its victims. Also of particular note here is the irony that Al made these comments at all. Classroom observations and previous interviews had witnessed Al's attempts to separate himself from the other African American males in his class. Al's lighter skin tone, his residence in a middle-class neighborhood, his membership on the baseball team,

and his frequenting of school spaces dominated by white boys all lent credence to the idea that Al was not to be considered "one of the (black) boys."[11]

Interviews and surveys also indicated a belief among some participants that their blackness created for them greater burdens and pressures to prove themselves, working against ingrained assumptions held by the greater population. A rather poignant interview with Sosa, who had actually experienced jail time and faced additional jail time for his alleged involvement in a recent robbery, suggested a rather downtrodden individual, feeling defeated by the pressures of his life. When I asked him specifically about these challenges he faces, he stated:

> Like, we don't live that carefree life like y'all think we do. We gotta work for everything we got. Ain't nothin' come to us easy—except for jail. That comes easy, jail. We got pressure. We got that 100% pressure on us since we been young. Everything always pressuring us to do better, be better. But the pressure don't always make us be better. It make some of us stray from the path to the wrong path, and that's how it ends.

Sosa's response suggests a resentment of the current framework in which he finds himself operating. He articulates his idea that being born black means an individual begins life bearing the identity of a race that has known intense pressure, struggled to overcome barriers, and not always succeeded. To him, life appeared to be an endless effort of climbing out of a black hole, seeking to evade the forces pulling him toward jail or some other tragic end. Simply put, to him, it seemed easier to land himself in jail than to find himself succeeding.[12]

While jail seemed to represent one potential negative turn for African American males, others cited the allure of quick fame as another. In a conversation with Dee, I asked him about African American males, their behaviors at school, and the school disciplinary system. In turn, he offered his thoughts on African American males who might hastily disregard the value of

[11] Mary Pattillo-McCoy's work *Black picket fences: Privilege and peril among the black middle class* (1999) explores through an ethnographic study the experiences of black middle class families in Chicago.
[12] *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander, 2012) asserts that the Jim Crow system still operates through the U.S. criminal justice system and its mass incarceration of black men.

schooling in exchange for the chance to become famous. When I asked him about African American males who misbehave in school, Dee said

> African American boys, I feel like they choose to act that way or just because, you know, they like to show off or whatever. Most of 'em like to show off and try to be all big and bad, try to get famous. To me, it like, it really don't matter. If you got fame, like on the music we listen to, like the rapper, he talk about, you can be famous. But you also gotta get money so you can have places to live, like, try to get rich. They was like, "Oh, I wanna get famous." I was like, "Well, you can get famous. I gonna get me a job." You can be famous and still be a bum on the streets. And I was like, "Bro, y'all gotta change y'all ways.

Dee's response here is significant because it denies the value of an alternate discourse associated with unsanctioned literacies. In other words, Dee appears to embrace the notion that formal schooling is the legitimate form of literacy, the one recognized by formal school discourses (Gee, 1990). To him, "getting famous" represents the opposing choice to "getting a job."

Yet, even in acknowledging multiple challenges faced by members of their race, several participants expressed their belief that African American could prevail with hard work and determination. An interview with Al illuminates his thoughts on African American success. As I have previously mentioned, Al seemed to subscribe to norms more commonly associated with the middle class, something which could have influenced his perspectives on African American male experiences. In contrast to other participants' responses, which often blamed systemic racism and biases for their struggles, Al's sentiments seemed more in line with traditional middle-class conceptions of the value of education and hard work. When I asked Al for his general thoughts on African American males, he said:

> I think African American men can be more successful than what they are right now if they really put their head to it. 'Cause sometimes the people that I be around, they're really intelligent, but they do some crazy things that'll mess up their lives. And I'd like to tell 'em something, but sometimes you really can't tell anybody anything. So, I think if African American men really put their heads to it, it would be, that would be cool. They'd be higher in society.

Al's response suggests his belief in the power of agency for African American males. To him, African American males can be successful if they want to be; they just need determination and hard work.

In my attempts to better understand African American male identities, I asked participants to describe their neighborhoods. Most participants, in detailing their neighborhoods, described an environment of drug and alcohol sales on the streets, as well as violence, particularly shootings. While several attested to their belief that most residents were friendly, when asked whether they would raise their children in their current neighborhoods, the majority of participants said they would not. Furthermore, they cited school and sports as their tickets out of these neighborhoods.

In addition, I found through classroom observations that participants are keenly aware of stereotypes and assumptions associated with their neighborhoods. For example, during a class discussion surrounding the novel *Monster,* students talked about the neighborhood Steve (main character) came from (the ghetto) and how that could have influenced his choices. BMore immediately issued a quick retort, saying, "Just because he come from a bad neighborhood don't mean he a bad person." In a concluding discussion for the novel, the teacher asked the class why they thought O'Brien (lawyer) would not hug Steve at the end of the trial. Sarcastically, BMore said, "Because he was black, because he grew up in Harlem." BMore articulates during this exchange his apparent frustration with ingrained stereotypes surrounding predominantly black neighborhoods.

The interviews I conducted with other participants also seemed to support the notion that the boys were aware of these stereotypes. Most participants' descriptors of their neighborhoods depicted these living spaces negatively, and they spoke about their reluctance to raise their own

families there. For example, in my interview with John, I asked him to talk about his experiences there. He said:

> It's a, I don't wanna say it's a bad experience, but it's, it's all right. It's like, it's good sometimes; sometimes it's not good. It depends. Like, it'll make you into a stronger person, like, harden you up and all. But other than that, too much stuff, like, stupid stuff. Like, people be shootin' for no reason. Other than that, it's, it's all good. Like, at first, you gonna live scared. But you get used of it.

I found John's interview striking because he seemed to acknowledge the unfortunate circumstances in which he lived, but as opposed to discussing his hopeful exit from the neighborhood, he emphasized his ability to cope with its circumstances. To John, his life in his difficult neighborhood offered one advantage: it represented an avenue for him to "harden up."

In a similar fashion, I spoke with Jay about his experiences in his neighborhood. Like John, he acknowledged the presence of violence and other issues there. When I asked him to talk about his neighborhood, Jay said:

> Like, where I stay at right now, it's really not, really all good 'cause you got, anywhere you look, you could find drugs. Anywhere you go, somebody buying alcohol for young children. Like, like, if you, if you step outside, there's a chance you could get shot, like that. You want to, you want to get out as soon as you can and get everybody you know out. I want, like, a peaceful neighborhood that, like, the crime is down, and you don't have, like, a whole bunch of people, like somewhere quiet—somewhere, like, more civilized, where crime really ain't that high, where you can really do something.

Particularly telling about Jay's words are his ideas about his ideal neighborhood. In defining what his current neighborhood is and then detailing, in direct contrast, the neighborhood he would like, he seems to accept with reluctance his current reality, almost as though the dream of a peaceful place to live is not his to have.

In contrast to most participants, who characterized their neighborhoods negatively, Al seemed to insist that his place of residence was different. Conversations with Al indicated his

only critique of his middle-class neighborhood was its quiet boredom and lack of activity. In an interview with Al, I asked him to talk about his neighborhood. He said:

> It's very quiet. Everybody back there is very nice. They work a lot, so none of them are at home. There's no kids, so it's very quiet. Safe and quiet. But, like, if my kids wanted to play, I would like to have some other kids for them to play and socialize with instead of having to play by themselves all the time.

I understood through the conversations I had with Al and the other participants about their neighborhoods, that their neighborhoods, whether safe and quiet or filled with violence, represent distinct markers of identity for them. Through other conversations, participants referenced the "turf wars" in which residents of various city neighborhoods engaged. For example, African American male students who were residents of one particular neighborhood were sure to be assaulted if seen in the boundaries of another particular neighborhood. And these neighborhood rivalries carried over into the school boundary lines, as well, prompting fighting amongst rival residents.

Interactions with the Police

Negative encounters with the police constituted a major theme in interviews with participants. Most participants reported viewing law enforcement officials as biased, prejudiced, and purposefully seeking to instigate problems with participants and other members of their race. Several of the boys told of personal encounters with police, suggesting inconsistent applications of the law, as well as the harassing of African American males by police.

Sosa routinely offered information about his personal dealings with the law. As I was arriving for the day, I saw Sosa coming down the hallway on his way to the office. He wanted to show me something. Lifting up his pants leg, he showed me a black ankle monitoring bracelet he had just received for his alleged involvement in an armed robbery. His trial date would be sometime in January 2013, and there was a possibility at the time that he could go to jail until the

age of 21. Sosa was also on probation for failing several drug screens (marijuana), something he laughed about when he told me.

These experiences undoubtedly colored his opinions of the criminal justice system. In his interviews, Sosa was quite frank with his critiques of law enforcement agencies and the criminal justice system. In his eyes, the system and its representatives were inherently prejudiced against African American males. When I asked him about his experiences with police, he said:

> Look, me and my dog were walkin', they (police) say we robbed somebody. So we were walkin' down the street, and they say, "The police lookin' for you." I said, "What they lookin' for me for?". So I went walk down there. They (police) like, "Pull your pants up!" So I'm walkin'. Man, my pants wasn't even down; my pants was on my waist. "Pull your pants up!" I'll pull 'em up, panties down, 'cause my pants was already up, you heard? And they gonna tell me, "Uh, get on the car!" And they put, they put my dog and his brother, they put them in the car, you heard me? They tried to talk to me. I'm like, "Man, I'm not about to talk to y'all for somethin' I didn't do!" Police always, like, it's like my name on the beat, on the list, number one on the list! If you see him, just doin' anything, stop him! It's mandatory!

In listening to Sosa's accounts of his interactions with police, I could not help but draw connections with accounts participants had provided about their interactions with school discipline. It appeared that, in the same way that dress code policies seemingly targeted African American male students for discipline, newly implemented "saggy pants" legislation represented attempts for the criminal justice system to pursue African American males for punishment. And the arbitrary enforcement of the new "saggy pants" law, as well as the racial profiling it perpetuated, was not lost on participants, most of whom were keenly aware of its implications.

Other participants also told me about their encounters with law enforcement officials. Dee had his first encounter with the law several years ago when friends dared him to throw fireworks at a police car. His acting on that dare led to his arrest and subsequent community service. Other participants mentioned second-hand experience with the criminal justice system, having known family members who served jail time. BMore, for example, witnessed his brother

arrested and put in jail for his "street life." However, BMore was reluctant to speak much about it, only mentioning that his brother's arrest has motivated him to become something other than a "street kid."

Sports

I found through talking with participants and examining their work, that sports represent a major part of participants' lives. Participants often wrote their journal entries about sports themes and devoted much of their personal writing to detailing their aspirations in sports. For some of them, playing a sport meant a sense of achievement. Participants emphasized the role of sports in motivating them to perform better academically. In addition, many ranked playing a sport as their first career choice, and they often cited sports celebrities among their role models. Finally, as participants told me in their interviews, they viewed playing sports as a way to stay out of trouble and an escape from life's struggles.

Conversations I had with participants suggest the power of sports in the boys' lives. An interview I conducted with BMore indicates his view of sports as a pathway to staying out of trouble. In fact, he insisted his recent school disciplinary incident would not have occurred had he not been in his off-season. When I asked him to talk about the role of sports in his life, he said, "They keep me outta trouble. Like, if I was playing sports right now, I probably wouldn't be in ISS (in-school suspension)." In a separate focus group interview, when I asked participants for further insight on the role of sports in their lives, participants indicated sports, especially basketball, fill the spaces of idle time for them in their neighborhoods. When the boys do not have anything to do after school, they call each other and arrange to play basketball on the neighborhood courts. Many insisted they would not have anything to do in their neighborhoods if it were not for basketball.

Other interviews aligned sports with motivation for school success, hope for a better life, and an escape from life's difficulties. In an interview with BMore, for example, I asked him which students he thought performed best in school. He said:

> The ones that are about their work, the ones that play basketball and football and stuff. 'Cause they on the team, and they know they gotta keep their grades up if they wanna stay on the team. I guess when track season come around, and I start running track, I guess that's gonna change me. I like sports, Miss! I ain't played sports in the last two years. And I know I can play for the school, and I'm gonna be running track for the school. I'm gonna play football next year and play basketball for my senior year.

Another focus group interview suggested sports as a ticket to a better life and as a way out of a deplorable neighborhood. When I asked participants about the role of sports in the lives of African American males, several insisted they view sports as "a way to get out of the hood." Bob stated, "That's why everybody wanna play basketball." In addition to escaping "the hood," playing sports appears to signify an avenue for escaping life's problems. In an interview, I asked John to explain the role of sports in his life. He said, "Like, it's a big role. It'll help take your mind off things. Like, I really wanna play sports when I grow up. I really wanna play sports."

Responses participants provided during a focus group interview shed light on their assumptions about racial roles for certain sports.

John: It seems like everybody that's black, play basketball.

Group: (laughs)

John: I mean, you don't see 'em playin'…

Tate: Soccer and golf…

Bob: Or baseball…

Group: (laughs)

Dee: I mean, you don't never see no black person playin' soccer; you never see 'em playin' baseball.

R: Why do you think that is?

BMore: ‘Cause everybody that…

Dee: ‘Cause people think that, like, baseball’s a white person sport, and basketball’s a black person sport, and football, I don’t know, it’s mixed.

Finally, participants recognized athletes as role models for African American men.

R: In your eyes, what kind of man do most African American men strive to be more like?

John: I’m tryin’ to think of somebody.

R: Any role models you might have?

John: I like Adrian Petersen. He plays football. His brother died, and that makes him stronger.

Poignantly positioning the proper role of sports for African American males, Al, in an interview, provided his thoughts on the necessary balance between sports and academics. Sports, he insisted, hold potential for African American men, but only if their sports abilities are combined with hard work in their academics. Al said:

> In sports, you can be a great athlete, but then, when they get in the classroom, they wanna act up, you know, not do their work. And that drives me ‘cause you’re a really good football player, but if you act like you have no type of common sense, then that really gets me. So I would like to tell ‘em that you just gotta really put your head to it and just, just keep going. Get your life right.

The significance surrounding participants’ thoughts about sports is that participants seem to affirm the critical role that playing sports has in their present lives and the promise it holds for their future lives. More importantly, participants’ responses highlight the broader role that sports play as community-based learning opportunities (Nasir, 2012). Because sports like basketball represent activities for which participants are not required to surrender their cultural identities in order to engage, sports symbolize possibilities for connecting out-of-school literacies with those

legitimized through formal schooling. Furthermore, sports signify critical points of identity creation for the participants, as they provide foundations for them to build self-esteem, craft repertoires of accomplishment, and motivate themselves through a sense of purpose.

Rap and Artwork as Points of Escape

Just as sports were cited by participants as an opportunity for escape from life's problems, other activities functioned similarly for the boys. Data collected through interviews, classroom observations, surveys, questionnaires, and student work samples suggest a prominent role for rap music and drawing in participants' lives. Participants' work samples, interview responses, and their journal entries consistently referenced rappers and their music. While not all participants agreed on whether rappers represent proper role models, most attested to the relevance of themes found in rap songs. Many of the participants stated the songs relate to their lives and their struggles. Furthermore, rap music appeared to provide inspiration for some participants to engage in writing, as they cited the writing of raps as the only writing in which they engage outside of school. In a focus group interview, I asked participants for insight into connections they felt with rap artists and their music.

Sosa: They got music that tell stories, like what people been through.

Bob: Music, you can, like, close your eyes and be like, "Yeah. I feel what they sayin'."

Dee: It move you, son.

BMore: Like, for real. Real life.

R: Ok. What kinds of artists are popular with you guys?

BMore: Lil' Wayne, Boosie…

John: The rappers that, um, really lived some of the hard life.

BMore: It's different than other music. It's different. Everybody around here, they got a lotta dudes that are rappin' at school, that live in my neighborhood and all the neighborhoods. I like rappers like Boosie, who spins real rap about the streets and stuff, how they been through it all.

Classroom observations also offered a glimpse into participants' perspectives on rap music and its role in their lives. For one particular class period in January, Ms. Clark had decided to show a Lil' Wayne video entitled "How to Love." The purpose was to link its themes to the class novel *The First Part Last* and generate a discussion about the role of decisions in teens' lives. The video depicts an African American teenage girl who grows up in a household where the mother has an abusive partner and does not experience "real" love. As a result, the young girl goes on to repeat the cycle, getting involved with derelict boys, becoming pregnant at a young age, and selling herself for sex. The video then rewinds to offer the young girl a starkly different life path—a more positive home life—and, hence, a more favorable outcome.

Students sat quietly engaged in the viewing of the video. At the conclusion of the video, Ms. Clark posed a journal prompt for students, asking them to write about the role of decisions in a teen's life. Students appeared to struggle with the deeper thought processes involved with the journal prompt, and one male student asked if they could just discuss the prompt as a class instead of writing it in their journals.

To open the discussion of the video, Ms. Clark asked students their thoughts on rappers, their reputations, and the assumptions that rap music degrades women and often features inappropriate lyrics. At this point, Bob stated, "Not all of 'em. You gotta listen to the lyrics." Ms. Clark then followed with a question about the video's overall theme, asking "What do you think Lil' Wayne is suggesting in the video?" BMore answered, "Get an education!" In the other class,

Ray and Vinny talked about rappers and how they are portrayed in a way that makes other people want to be like them. But Vinny pointed out the downside that often accompanies rappers' fame: "A lot of rappers, like a rapper come from a good home, they get money and they change. That happens all the time." At this point, the African American male students debated whether Lil' Wayne himself is "genuine."

Like classroom observations and participants' interview responses, participants' work samples also provided an opportunity to examine their views on rap music. Specifically, as part of a project on identity, students were asked to list three songs they found meaningful or that depicted their outlook on life. In looking through participants' selections, I saw that the majority of songs cited by participants were of the rap genre. Furthermore, I noted that many of the titles had similar themes: dreams or escaping worries. A sample of the rap titles participants selected is included below.

Lil' Wayne: "No Worries"

Drake: "YOLO"

2chainz: "I'm Different"

Lil' Boosie: "Far Off;" "Chasing My Dreams"

Meek Mill: "Dreams"

Chief Keef: "Rolling"

Lil' Trill: "Sometimes I Wonder"

Wiz Khalifa: "Deep Sleep"

Like rap music, art offers an escape for many of the participants. I noticed that participants often created drawings during class. Drawing appeared to provide participants relief from boredom, particularly during activities participants considered mundane, such as long

reading passages or lengthy periods of direct instruction. Data from classroom observations, interviews, and student journals suggest that drawing is also viewed by participants as an escape from life's hardships and valued by participants as a form of expression. In fact, many of them have tattoos representing something of sentimental value or telling part of their life stories.

R: Ok. You like to draw. Is drawing something you do at home when you're not at school? Do you do it for fun?

Dee: Yeah. Like, when I'm at home, I like to draw a lot. It just, like, helps with whatever I'm going through. I'll just go sit at the table and just draw whatever is on my mind.

R: Can you tell me about some of the things you might draw?

Dee: Sometimes I'll draw some roses, a heart, different symbols.

R: And when you say 'different symbols,' are they symbols that mean something to you in your life?

Dee: Yeah. Something happened. Like, one day, I had drew the drama faces, and my momma had asked me why I drew that, and I never told here why.

R: The drama faces? Like, the little masks you would see, like, at Mardi Gras?

Dee: Yeah.

R: Can you tell me why? What does that mean to you?

Dee: Like, everybody could be happy at times and be sad at times. If you happy, just like when you sad, just make sure, just try to cheer yourself up. If you happy, just try to always be happy. Just make sure you stay happy instead of being sad. And make sure you do things that you want to do instead of friends convincing you to do things that you don't want to do 'cause that'll make you sad.

Significant in participants' valuing of art and tattoos are the possibilities that exist for bridging their out-of-school literacies with formal school literacies. If participants' artwork, drawings, and tattoos are viewed as "a potential to make meaning and an opportunity to comment on one's realities through a symbol system that uses more than words" (Kirkland, 2009), then their out-of-school literacies become recognized as alternate forms of self-expression and legitimate avenues through which to construct their identities.

School Literacies: Negotiating Frameworks of Formal Schooling

As I stated earlier, I conducted observations of participants in their classroom setting with Ms. Clark for over four months. During this time, I interacted with participants through our discussions of the novels, worked with them during novel unit activities, and interviewed them about their insights on schooling. I was interested in finding out how they negotiated school frameworks and how schooling impacted their identities.

Perspectives on Schooling, Teachers, and Literacies

A good portion of the interview process was devoted to finding out participants' views on schooling and literacy in general, their perceptions about teachers, subjects, and class activities and assignments, more specifically. This interview data, combined with data from observations, surveys, and student work samples, suggest participants outwardly profess an understanding of the value of education but fail to see a deeper relevance of schooling to their present lives or their future lives. In fact, many of the participants who outwardly subscribed to school's necessity, were later observed disturbing their classes or clowning around with friends. In addition, many participants reported stellar academic performance followed by a gradual decline throughout middle school. Math was indicated as the subject area with which participants struggled most. Among other findings regarding schooling, data suggest many participants: live in environments

where formal education is undervalued; once enjoyed school and achieved in school but report a loss of interest in school (for some, a sense of dread about coming to school); view school as an obstacle, something to endure or get through (similar to jail time); subscribe to a blind assumption that a better job and, hence, a better life will be theirs if they tolerate and accept the daily drudgery of schooling; possess distinct opinions regarding teachers, claiming to know whether certain teachers genuinely care about students or are merely there for the paycheck; dislike classes involving individual work, particularly note taking, but prefer classes involving group work, especially group projects; overwhelmingly cite math as their most difficult and disliked class; typically do not engage in reading or writing outside of school, but do read internet material on sports; and feel that young adult novels (especially *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton and *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers) contain themes that relate to their lives.

For many of the participants, school serves a definitive purpose, functioning as a means to an end. School exists to satisfy a short-term, concrete goal, such as getting a job or getting out of their present neighborhood. In fact, many of the boys found current instructional practices boring and irrelevant, as suggested by the following focus group interview excerpt.

> R: Let me ask you a question because y'all talked about school and education. Do y'all feel like what you do in school has something to do with what you're going to do for your career? For your job? Does it have anything to do with the rest of your life?
>
> John: Half the stuff we learn, it gonna be irrelevant, to anything.
>
> Tate: Stuff we learn in biology, in chemistry, when you, I mean, you ain't never see that in life.
>
> Dee: And math, algebra…
>
> Tate: Like, that's why I'm glad they came up with the opting out (refers to career

diploma versus core four track). Like, they pick all the classes you don't need in life, and they take 'em off your schedule and give you, like, an extra elective class or somethin'. That's why I'm gonna do that at the end of April.

Dee: They ask you what you wanna be when you grow up. I think you should specifically take those classes instead of extra stuff.

Tate: Yeah!

Dee: Unless you got, like, a plan B, plan C. You just take the classes you know.

Tate: Yeah, I'm makin' Fs for nothin'! Like, I don't know nothin' about this!

John: For real.

R: So you guys don't see the need to be exposed to these other things just to be educated?

Dee: You know what you wanna be when you grow up. Say you wanna be a mathematician. Why you need science if you going do this? All you need is the basic stuff. You don't need all that advanced math, calculus, and all that.

Tate: Why you need all that of you goin' mess with chemicals?

R: So you should just come to school for the things you need for your job?

Groups: Yeahhh.

Tate: Yeah! For the things you wanna be.

Dee: Like, say I wanna go to the NFL. What's biology got to do with going to the NFL?

John: Well, no, that's not really a job. Really, I really wanna do somethin' with electrician and all that. I wish all I had to do was take ag (agriculture) classes and all that.

Dee: Yeah. That's gonna help you out, ag classes.

John: Stuff like that.

Tate: Yeah, welding classes.

Dee: Like, that's how I feel. Like, if they'd ask you what you wanna be when you grow up, all right. You tell 'em. If you don't know nothin', try to think of one soon. And if you don't have one, tell 'em one, and then take those classes to help you get that job.

Ironically, though participants criticized school's value in relation to their prospective jobs, many also equated schooling with a better life, acknowledging the pain they endure today would pay off in the future. As seen in the interview excerpt below, one participant acknowledged the status of the educated person in direct contrast to that of a "thug". Vinny said, "Everybody need school. I gonna tell my child, when I have one, I mean, he ain't gonna be no thug. I'm gonna whip his ass. He gonna be a college kid!"

In another section of this interview, one participant viewed schooling as essential for one's future family. In his mind, school is necessary to prevent "getting stuck" once a man suddenly finds himself saddled with family responsibilities. To Vinny, enduring school was the price to pay for preventing future regret and remorse associated with dropping out. He said:

> Like, people gettin' pregnant? They like, "Man, I gotta drop out for my baby." Man, you droppin' out for your baby? What good that gonna do? 'Cause when you get in the real world, you not gonna have no control over…job's gonna come, pampers gonna come, so you gonna be stuck, and you gonna be like, "Oh, man!" Then you gonna think, "I wish I coulda went back to school." School really mean a lot 'cause if you in a predicament like that, and you determined, you gotta have it on your mind, like, "Look, I'm gonna go to school; I'm gonna graduate and get my diploma; I'm gonna do it for me and my baby and my family.

In a similar way, an interview with BMore provides insight into his understanding of school in an immediate, utilitarian sense. For him, school's purpose is keeping him out of jail because being out of school was sure to mean being on the streets, the quickest way to land people behind bars. When I asked him about the role of schooling in his life, he said, "Like, these other dudes on the corner prob'ly on the street right now while I'm at school. Need to stay in

school, go back to school, do something—gotta make sure you stay off the streets ‘cause the streets will put you in jail.”

While BMore directly connects school with staying out of jail, an interview with Jay suggested an almost automated, parroted response as to the value of school and education, perhaps indicating a lack of a genuine connection with schooling or the inability to understand a definitive purpose for school in his life. Interestingly enough, he did not claim to have given much thought to his life beyond high school.

R: So that leads into another question—the purpose of school and education. What are you here for?

Jay: Like, really, to learn and to do better in life. Like, learn life in school so when you get out, you can do your best in everything.

R: Ok. What are your future plans for when you finish high school? What do you want to do?

Jay: Go to college, finish college, have a nice job, take care of my family.

R: What kinds of things do you see yourself maybe majoring in or doing as your lifetime career?

Jay: I really, I really haven’t been thinkin’ about that too much.

Like BMore, who views school in a utilitarian sense—for keeping him out of jail, Jay likewise sees school as a way out of his crime-ridden neighborhood. In interviews, where Jay spoke about his neighborhood as a place where “you could still get shot or something,” he expressed the desire to one day live “somewhere quiet.” To Jay, as to the other boys, school represents a way out of his present circumstances—a ticket to a better life. While he spoke somewhat abstractly

about school's value for him, Jay did cite school as a source of motivation for him in other areas of his life, especially since he would be the first in his family to finish high school. He said:

> It's like a no-brainer, to go ahead and finish school. Like, I wanna be the first person to finish, get outta school and continue on to college, like that. So school really help to push me into doing lots of things. Like football, school's pushing me to do that. Basketball, school's pushing me to do that.

A focus group interview shed additional light on participants' views about schooling and its purpose. While many of the boys verbalized the need for school, some equated the day-to-day schooling experience with jail time. Interviews suggest the perspective that school is a hurdle they must get over, time they must serve, pain they must endure.

R: So is school, then, something you have to get through, like do your time, like you would in jail? I mean, is that what you all are saying?

Vinny: No, like, it's funner than jail 'cause nobody wanna be in jail. Like, but it's the same sometimes.

Ray: Nobody wanna be in school.

Vinny: Yeah, you right, Miss. It's kinda the same. Like, sometimes people don't wanna be in school.

R: So you're just doing your time here?

Ray: Yeah.

Al: You just doin' your time. I just go day by day.

Vinny: I would like to have a lot of opportunities. It's just the pain I have to go through will make me stronger.

In sum, data collected indicate the ideas participants hold about the value and purpose of school are as unique participants' lives themselves. Depending on their life circumstances and future goals, the boys cited a variety of ways in which completing school would enhance their

lives. However, most agreed that school lacks necessary connections to their lives and fails to inspire them. As one participant, Vinny, commented, "You hate school, but you love education." I found Vinny's final statement particularly telling, since it suggests participants value the ultimate attaining of an education but may not value, or recognize as legitimate, the process required to get there.

Participants also indicated through interviews the complex nature of their neighborhoods regarding support for formal literacy. Most of the participants indicated their parents or guardians support their school achievement in the home. But while many participants claimed that neighborhood residents encourage them to "stay in school," many of these same residents never completed school themselves and do not practice habits supportive of formal literacy. Perhaps these residents speak from experience and a sense of regret, hoping to prevent younger kids from similar fates. An interview with BMore illuminates the potential influences of his community on his academic successes and his perceptions of schooling. When I asked him how education and schooling are viewed in his home and in his neighborhood, he said:

> Man, the people that went to this school and are doing those drugs and stuff, they say 'you need to stay in school; you a bright kid; you need to stay in school.' And my daddy's very strict about grades; he always get on me about my grades. But I don't know if people in my neighborhood read. I really don't know 'cause I don't see 'em reading. I just see 'em countin' money.

For Dee, his immediate family provides a sense of support for his academic performance. He said, "My mom make sure I do my homework, like, all the time. Like, as soon as I get home, she sees me just, like, sitting down. She'll be like, 'You got homework? Go do it. And make sure you show me it before you pick it up'."

For Al, his mother's early involvement in his education has proven essential for his success in school. When I asked him about his early literacy habits, he cited his mother's reading to him at a young age as a possible influence in his school successes. He said:

> My mom read to me very often 'cause I think, it was, like, fourth grade. I had to take all kinds of tests because they wanted to skip me up a grade. So my mom made me read a lot to keep my vocabulary up and everything. I think her reading to me really helped me out.

In addition to family and community support for literacy, I also asked participants their insights on specific class activities and instructional strategies. Many participants seemed to have a clear preference about kinds of activities they engaged in during their classes. For example, most said they preferred group work, projects, and other collaborative tasks. Field notes I took during observations support the boys' dislike of lengthy periods of direct instruction and lecturing. For example, upon the students' return to school from Thanksgiving break, Ms. Clark stood before the class and lectured them about following class rules, reminding them about policies for make-up work. She then elaborated on how she came to school over the break, cleaned out the desks, and scrubbed the desk tops. Finally, she warned students not to dirty the desks. Throughout the lecture, which lasted almost ten minutes, I observed that most of the participants were not actively listening. Several had their heads down, while others looked around, daydreamed, or doodled. An interview with John supports participants' preference for collaborative work. When I asked him about the kinds of activities he enjoys in his classes, he said, "I rather do, like, projects and group work, as long as I know the person." In a similar fashion, Dee indicated a liking for collaborative projects, especially those involving drawing. He said, "I like to draw. I like when we got projects, and we gotta draw something. I be the drawing person for the rest of the group." In contrast, he said, "I don't like classes where all we do is read and not do class activities together.

Participants also indicated a preference for those classes where teachers made real-world connections to the lesson. As seen in an interview with BMore, connecting subject matter with sports garnered his interest. He seemed to respect most those teachers who could "take care of their business" instructionally while also making subject matter interesting. When I asked him to talk about his connections with teachers and their teaching styles, he said:

> Like, for my U.S. History, I got Mr. Gilfour, and like, he's funny, but he's also about the lesson plan. Like, I had heard something about, like, how all these basketball teams had got their names from, and it was interesting to me. If you can make geometry and English II and III like that, man, I be makin' straight As!

Preferences for class activities also extended to writing-specific tasks. Many participants stated their enjoyment of writing that relates to them personally, particularly sports themes. In an interview I had with Jay, he voiced his dislike for assignments involving lengthy expository paragraphs, preferring personal writing instead. When I asked him what kinds of activities he likes to do in his classes, he said:

> Like, projects and stuff like that, but not, like, when I gotta write long paragraphs and stuff like that. That's the only thing I don't like doing. For writing, I like talking about stuff, like what you like to do, what you want to do, stuff like that. Expressing yourself, that's what I like to write about.

Aside from asking participants their views on class activities and instructional strategies, I also asked for their insights about teachers. Interviews suggest participants draw conclusions about a teacher primarily based on the format in which classes are conducted. Many of the participants claimed to know whether a teacher cared, simply by the manner in which class was conducted. Others felt as though teachers pitied them, looking upon them with condescension. Likewise, they understood some teachers' efforts to be the equivalent of mere babysitting. Common themes emerging from interviews suggest participants believe some teachers are fair and genuinely care about students. Other teachers: purposefully teach material using difficult-to-

understand methods to confuse students; verbalize concern for students but do not act upon their professed concern; are merely present in the classroom for the purpose of a paycheck; write discipline referrals arbitrarily, not based upon a system of fairness.

An interview with Jay illuminates his thoughts on his civics class, a class he considers boring because of typical activities in which the students are engaged—mostly note taking. When I asked him what aspect of the class he considered uninteresting, he said, "Like, all we do in there is just take notes. Like, she give us a bunch of stuff to do." An interview with BMore suggests similar thoughts about his class activities. When I asked him if his study skills class was helpful for him, he said, "No. We just play computer games. It's just babysitting."

Some participants viewed teachers as merely another hurdle associated with their schooling experience. An interview with John provides insight on his thoughts about teachers. In his mind, he can decipher which teachers care and which teachers do not, in addition to identifying those who possess condescending attitudes toward him. In an interview, I asked him if there is something about a teacher that he connects with or likes. He said:

> I like a fun teacher. Like, certain teachers, like, they willing to work with you more than other teachers. Like, other teachers, you know, you could tell they really don't care about you, and some teachers do. Some teachers, you could just tell what they here for. Like, certain teachers, you could just tell they here to help you. Some teachers, it's like they don't care. They got a bunch of 'em here. Like, you ask them for help, they gonna act like it's a bother or something, like they don't really wanna help you. They just, like, pity you or something. It's like, you ask for help, like, some teachers, they don't really care to help you. And some other teachers, they'll help. Like, they'll offer you help and stuff.

I found John's reflections on his teachers particularly telling, as they suggest his awareness of understood codes and hidden agendas through which teachers operate. Rather than his blindly accepting the projected identities of all of his teachers, he appeared to critique their performances, questioning the authenticity of these identities.

Regardless of his personal feelings about his teachers and their identities, Al suggested through his interview his understanding that forming positive relationships with teachers can provide the ticket to future successes. Rather than critique or question his teachers and their motives, he appeared to simply accept them at face value. I wondered if his lack of critique was, in fact, associated with his more middle-class ideologies. When I asked Al about his connections to his teachers, he said:

> Like, what I do, I try to make friends with all my teachers 'cause, like, I wanna go to college for football, and the coaches come and talk to the teachers, get some background off you. So I don't wanna have no enemy-type teachers to give me a bad compliment. So I just make friends with all my teachers. On the first day, you gotta try to make friends.

Regarding another area of schooling, participants acknowledged the power their peers hold in impacting their success in school. According to participants, fighting with school mates begins sometime in elementary school, as boys struggle to define themselves as males and establish their reputations. Respect among peers was repeatedly cited by participants as something to fight for. Furthermore, fighting was often the alternative to showing fear, something participants claimed to be the death knell for anyone hoping to avoid bullying.

Many of the participants encountered struggles with peer relationships in their early years of schooling. Bullying appears to have been a common issue for these boys, many having been the victims of bullying, picked on for their small size. Interestingly, however, many of them recall these experiences as struggles that made them stronger. An interview with John details his encounters with peers.

> John: When I was young, I used to get picked on. But now it made me into, like, a stronger person. So I ain't worried about it anymore. And I used to bully people but not no more.
>
> R: You used to bully people?

John: Not no more.

R: So when you got picked on, what was it, like was there something they were picking on you for?

John: I was a few feet smaller than everybody.

In a similar fashion, Jay negotiated challenges involving peers throughout his schooling.

R: What challenges or difficulties have you faced in school?

Jay: Like, just being in school, coming to school, dealing with the people in school, fights, stuff like that.

R: What's your biggest difficulty with the students?

Jay: It's like, somebody come up to me and say something, it's hard for me not to say nothin' back and cause a commotion and get into something. When I was in sixth grade, I used to be small. So people used to tend to pick on me. So on day, I just blacked out, had to fight.

Aside from encountering bullying in elementary and middle schools, peer pressure as a force also surrounds academic achievement. Participants suggested through interviews that they struggle to negotiate tensions between academic achievement and peer acceptance. Interviews suggest that participants: have experienced students being teased for making good grades, purportedly admire those students who achieve academically, and lack respect for academic achievers who boast about their achievement. Interestingly, participants also seem to separate themselves from these academic achievers, saying "that's good for *them*." Interview excerpts below surround participants' views on academic achievement and peer pressure.

R: If a guy studies a lot, is he worried? Is he worried about his reputation? Is it a good thing for his reputation that he studies, works hard, makes good grades? Or is it a bad thing?

Jay: It's really a good thing 'cause he trying to do somethin'. He got, he tryin' to finish school probably, studying, tryin' to do somethin' with himself.

R: So do other guys look upon him in a good way? Or is he likely to get teased?

Jay: Most likely to get teased, for the time being. But then, at the same time, they gonna be like, "That's what's up! At least he's doin' somethin'!"

R: So he has to, then, put up with the teasing in school, and then later he'll be respected? Is that what you're saying?

Jay: Yeah.

R: Do you think most guys can put up with that in school and actually study? Or do they get to where they, the peer pressure is so much that they just give up because they want to please their friends? What do you see?

Jay: I think, if you really tryin' to do it, no word gonna stop you. No word, no action, no one else is gonna stop you from doin' it. But, like, if you really not focused on, payin' attention, doin' your work, then it's gonna get you down, you know.

An interview with John provides further understanding regarding peer influences on grades.

R: What do you think of students who study hard and make good grades?

John: There's nothin' wrong with that.

R: Do they get picked on, or are they looked up to? How do you see them?

John: It depends on, like, how their personality is, to me. Like, I don't, it don't really bother me. Like, I don't care. It's like, you study hard, that's good; that's a good thing.

But, like, it depend how you act. Like, you brag about it, like you smart and all, I ain't really gonna talk to you.

R: (laughs) So as far as reputation, if you're known around this school as studying hard and making good grades—would that be a good thing for you? Or would that be something you'd like to keep under wraps?

John: Um, it's a good thing. Nah, I don't know. To tell you the truth, I don't know.

R: In terms of your reputation, would it be a good thing or a bad thing?

John: Good 'cause then everybody wanna cheat off you! (laughs)

To BMore, students who make good grades are to be envied because they are "getting their education." In fact, BMore insists the "clowns" who tease the achievers would be better off taking the energies used for misbehaving and putting them toward academic efforts.

R: What do you think of students who study hard and make good grades?

BMore: I think that's props to them 'cause they doin', they gettin' their education.

R: Do these kids get teased?

BMore: Nah, I think the students that's not doing anything at school, they could get their education if they apply themselves. Like, all these clowns and stuff, they wanna clown. If they can do that, they can get their education, like these students that study hard and stuff.

An interview with Al indicates the realities sometimes associated with making good grades—teasing. I learned through interviews with Al that he does not associate himself with most members of the black race, preferring instead to hang out with white male students at school, particularly since he was a member of the school baseball team. He insisted that he does

not participate in the teasing, though, and claimed he is not "bothered" by other students' academic successes.

> R: What about kids who study hard and make good grades? Is it a good thing that they study hard and make good grades, or do they get teased? What are your experiences?
>
> Al: My experiences with kids like that, it don't really bother me, just because they study a lot. It's just, they're making the right choices. So it doesn't really bother me a lot. But sometimes I see other people make fun of them 'cause they make good grades and all that. But I don't really go along with that 'cause I think that's really cool of them to make good grades and really wanna go somewhere in life.

Classroom observations suggest among participants the presence of shared experiences, memories, friendships, and possibly, an undeclared commonality among them—a common thread running throughout their lived experiences in schooling. Classroom observations witnessed the boys playfully interacting, taunting each other, and referencing shared memories. On several occasions during class time, the participants would check each other aloud, for example, correcting an individual's inaccurate statement or chiding someone for acting silly. As suggested by these observations, the boys are accustomed to such interactions, as rarely did one of them become angered during such verbal exchanges.

During one particular class period, I witnessed the participants making jokes, laughing about teacher pranks they used to pull in past teachers' classrooms. One prank they recalled involved "The Wasp," where they shot an object, often paper, across the classroom with a rubber band. Participants laughed when Dee mimicked a teacher who used to tell them, "Stop shooting those missiles!" (refers to the formal, "discipline referral" term for objects thrown in class). On another occasion, BMore volunteered to read aloud a part from *Monster*. However, when he

began reading in a silly tone, Bob quickly corrected him, telling him to "read right, man!" And on another day, I saw another example of their kinship when Sosa chased Dee around the classroom, saying, "Come on, gimme a lil' sugar kiss!" Both boys were promptly corrected by the teacher.

Negotiating School Discipline

School discipline constitutes another area of schooling with which participants appear to struggle. While not all the participants have received disciplinary referrals or had dealings with administrators, the majority of them have. To most participants, school rules are arbitrary, inconsistently enforced, and seemingly only applied to them. Furthermore, school policies such as the dress code are often applied inconsistently, as well, and often represent for participants the entry point to a continual school discipline cycle. Discussions with participants suggest the presence of some disciplinary policies, such as the school dress code, are not consistently enforced across racial lines. Much like conversations I had with participants about police and perceived racial profiling practices, some school policies seemed to exist for the purpose of similar racial profiling within the school realm.

An interview I had with BMore suggests his idea that school discipline frameworks are biased. Interestingly, his responses highlight his idea of school disciplinary procedures as negotiable, as a space to bargain with authority figures for a lesser sentence, and I wondered if his perceptions possibly related to a broader experience with or knowledge of the criminal justice system. When I asked him about his relationships with his administrators, BMore stated, "Pssh, that's horrible right there! They never give me the thing I wanna get. They always give me ISS (in-school suspension). I want after-school detention. Man, I can't sit down for eight hours (in ISS). I can't sit down…" As suggested by his response, disciplinary consequences represent an

opportunity for bargaining, further suggesting his understanding of discipline itself as arbitrary. In other words, to BMore, it seemed the school disciplinary framework lacked legitimacy, thereby making the awarding of consequences subject to his scrutiny. Our conversation regarding school discipline continued, as I asked him his general thoughts about the fairness of school for African American boys. When I asked him if he thought school is fair for African American boys, he said, "It's not fair. Like, like, see I get a major referral, and I get ISS. But some other dude walks in there (refers to office), I'm not gonna discriminate…And then, he (a white boy) get a major referral, and he get after-school detention. That's not fair."

In a way similar to my conversations with BMore, an interview with John suggests negative impressions of school disciplinary practices. Of particular note in his interview is his understanding of school discipline as biased in favor of those students performing well in their classes. As opposed to BMore's understanding of school discipline as racially biased, John believed the system was performance biased. In other words, to John, students who performed well academically were the ones who received preferential treatment by administrators when it came to discipline. I asked him in an interview about his experiences with school discipline. He said:

> They write you up for stupid stuff. Like, the other day, I had cursed in class. They gave me two days after school for no…that's stupid! They (other students) get away with it. Me, I get a write-up. I think it's based on, like, how good they do in the class. Like, if their grades are good, like real good, then they gonna get better treatment than everybody else.

The irony of John's understanding of school discipline as biased toward students who perform well in their classes is that he does not appear to recognize racial biases in the awarding of consequences. Rather, it seems that in his mind, the school's disciplinary practices are somewhat

more meritorious. If consequences hinge upon school achievement, students can at least exert some influence in their fates.

While the majority of the participants cited concerns with school disciplinary practices, at least one participant did not share these sentiments. An interview with Jay suggests that he does not view school discipline as unfair. Rather, Jay voiced his insistence that the largest problem for African Americans is the strife among African American students themselves.

Perspectives on Reading and Young Adult Novels

Surveys, questionnaires, classroom observations, and interviews suggest participants do not like to read. Findings were mixed regarding perceived value of reading. Many participants indicated they believe reading is a waste of time, boring, and they would rather someone just tell them the information so they will not have to read. Others, however, admitted that reading could be fun, depending on the book selected. In addition, most participants were uncertain as to whether the books they read in their classes had anything to do with African American males. Responses were mixed regarding connections they feel with characters in texts they read in their classes. Ironically, survey results reveal that participants do not think that reading books is important to their future successes; yet they believe that to be successful in life, people need to earn an education. To gauge participants' overall opinions on reading, a pre-study questionnaire was administered at the start of the novel units. One item on the instrument provided participants an open-ended question: "Reading is…" Responses are included below.

Reading is: something I really don't like to do; boring and doesn't have a point to me; just not for me; boring, but it enhances your vocabulary; something I do when I'm stupid bored; boring at times and interesting at times; boring sometimes but can be fun; exciting, and it opens a

new world to other people's thoughts and life experiences; stories that you might like; great on some occasions when you want to learn more and know some things.

I also found through my data a hint of participants' dislike for canonical literature and preference for young adult selections. In the pre-study questionnaire previously referenced, I asked participants to name the best book they had ever read. Overwhelmingly, participants named *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton as their favorite, with Pony Boy as the character with which they connected best. For example, in an interview, I asked BMore about his preference for books like *Harry Potter*. In his response, he also referenced *The Crucible*, a popular canonical text read in American Literature, as a recent addition to his will-not-read-again list. He stated:

> I can't sit down and read no book about, what's it called, like that book I just finished reading, *The Crucible*. That book is horrible! Man, you talkin' about witchcraft. I'm not like that! The teacher's just not teaching me nothin' I'm interested in. You put that *Monster* test in front of me, I bet you I'd make an A right now!

At the conclusion of the two young adult novel units, I re-administered the pre-study questionnaire. While some participants still retained their original anti-reading sentiments, the majority of participants indicated a general openness to reading and an acknowledgment of its potential value. The same item "Reading is…" was met with the following responses:

> a good thing to do; a waste of time, but you need it to graduate; interesting sometimes, depending on what the book is about; fun, and it brings out a creative mood; if I had to choose to read, most likely I wouldn't; not fun; okay, depending on the book I am reading; when you read and learn a lot of things; very important, but you have a choice to.

In addition to responding to questionnaires, participants also shared through interviews their thoughts on reading. In a focus group interview, participants shared their views regarding the young adult selections read as part of the two novel units. Particularly of note in the interviews was the acknowledgment by participants of possibilities for making real-life connections with young adult novels.

R: Talk about the novel *Monster*. Did you guys like the novel *Monster*? What did you get from the novel? Tell me about it.

BMore: I liked it.

R: You liked it?

BMore: I liked being Steve.

R: Why did you like being Steve?

BMore: 'Cause he was a dog. I was, like, waitin' to see what was gonna happen.

Group: Yeah. Yeah.

BMore: Like, the more I was readin' it, the more I was gettin' into it. Like, I was anxious to see what would happen next.

R: Ok. Some of you have said that you could relate to the novel. What was it that you could relate to?

Sosa: The trial, the part that he would go on trial for robbing somebody. And I'm about to go to trial probably.

BMore: Him tryin' to identify who he is.

R: Ok. Why does that speak to you, him trying to figure out who he is?

BMore: 'Cause a lot of people will tell you this, tell you that, but you don't believe 'em. You gotta do what you believe.

An interview with Jay also highlights his views on preferred reading selections.

R: Is there a book that stands out in your mind as something that has either impacted your life or that you just remember as being a great book you read?

Jay: *Monster*—that's a great book.

R: *Monster*. Ok. What do you like about *Monster*?

Jay: It's, like, really funny because they got people today that can relate exactly like that, went through the same thing. But at the same time, you young; you in my position, and, like, where Steve (main character) come from, that's like where I come from. There's a chance of me being accused of something I didn't do.

In a separate interview, John discussed his connections to *The Outsiders*.

R: In school, has there ever been anything you've read that has really interested you?

John: *The Outsiders*, the book *The Outsiders* from, like, sixth grade, seventh grade, eighth grade—it was one of them years.

R: What did you like about *The Outsiders*?

John: It was just a cool book. Like, it was a story about these two gangs and all; it was just a cool book, and, like, you could relate to it 'cause it's like, you live, like, you live in the hood and stuff; there's a lot of violence, you know, and, like, you could, I could relate to it.

An interview with Al indicates his liking for the novel *Monster*, as well as an appreciation for its real-life applications. However, in contrast to other participants, he insists the novel holds no possibility for connections with his own life.

R: Have you liked this book *Monster* that we've read in class?

Al: Yes. I really like this book.

R: Why?

Al: 'Cause it's some sort of, like, I don't know, you get connected to real life, instead of just a book that somebody wrote. You get connected to real life.

R: That novel with the real-life events—do those real-life events pertain to your real-life events?

Al: No. Not really. I can't compare myself to that book.

R: Ok. Explain. Why? How are you not like, or how is your situation or your life not like that book?

Al: The way I was raised. My mom taught me to always be a leader and not a follower and make, and choose the right path and to make friends that you know that's not going to get you in trouble. So, the way I was raised, you have to, you know, stay away from a bad group and find someone that you know is going to relate yourself to you. That's the way I was raised.

Classroom observations also indicated participants' connections to the young adult selections (*Monster* and *The First Part Last*) read in the two novel units. On one occasion, when Ms. Clark had scheduled something other than reading the novels for the class period, participants verbally protested, voicing their disappointment that they could not continue reading the novel that day. On another occasion, participants spontaneously rose and walked about the classroom as they read their parts from *Monster*, acting out their parts in front of the class. In addition, when the classes concluded the reading of *Monster*, several participants conducted searches on their phones for information about a possible movie for the book. During a debate centering on themes from *The First Part Last*, students became emotionally engaged in their discussions, some pounding their fists on the podium as they delivered their arguments. Finally, some class discussions surrounding the broader theme of identity engaged students in deep, emotional conversations, occasionally prompting students to cry. Throughout the novel units, Ms. Clark received notes from students telling her that they had never participated in class discussions that way before.

General observations I made throughout the two novel units involve the possibilities for classroom conversations created by the novels. Because we explored the theme of identity in both novels, many of our class discussions centered on identity. Near the beginning of *Monster*, Ms. Clark asked students about their general understandings of identity. When she solicited responses for definitions of identity, Dee said, "It's your social security number." The discussion then turned to multiple identities individuals can possess in different social situations.[13] Participants' responses suggest their awareness of the multiple forms of identity one person can hold simultaneously.

> Bob: Them teachers, when administrators come in, they be sittin' at their desk or in the front of the class all day. They suddenly get up and walk around, start lookin' at what you doin'.
>
> John: That's like at church. You act different, sit there, be quiet.
>
> Bob: When people post those pictures on Instagram, like, that looks nothin' like those people.

Defining a "Real Man"

As part of the novel units, discussions took place regarding the concept of manhood as situated within the broader discourse of identity. Specifically, participants were asked during interviews about their views on manhood, the ideal man, and African American men. Activities and discussions during class also centered on students' perceptions of men versus boys, as well as their definitions of a father. Findings suggest that participants hold firm views about attributes and descriptors of ideal men and fathers. Participants feel that real men: tend to their

[13]Murrell (2008) terms this "situated identity," referring to identity as formed through various social practices. This lens views identity in the plural form "identities," acknowledging the multiple identities people enact in different social situations.

responsibilities, “take care of their business,” show a sense of independence, and put their family and God first. Participants also feel that fathers: provide for, both in time and money, their children and family; are present in their lives; and teach boys how to be men, including assisting them in negotiating implicit rites of passage for becoming men.

Below, I detail several interviews that provided insight on manhood and fatherhood. An interview with BMore suggests his idea that manhood is correlated with financial security and, hence, independence.

R: What does it mean to be a man? Like, what’s a real man?

BMore: A real man? In my eyes, it’s somebody that can pay the bills, somebody that has a house, somebody that has a job and has money in their pocket. That’s what makes a man. And that means you’re ready for the world, and you’re ready for anything that comes at you ‘cause you know you a man ‘cause you can stand up on your own feet with nobody else’s help.

R: Ok. What does it mean to be an African American man?

BMore: The same thing—having money in your pocket, having a job, paying your bills, and having a house and not being on the streets.

John’s definition of an ideal African American man highlights a qualifier more contingent upon upholding values.

R: What does it mean to be an African American man?

John: Really, like, just take care of your family, put God first, and, like, just try to be a better man.

An interview with Dee likewise underscores his idea that “real” African American men demonstrate a sense of responsibility.

R: In your opinion, what does it mean to be an African American man?

Dee: I really don't know. Well, like, I would say an African American man takes things seriously, takes care of things, like, when he needs to, and don't do bad things or whatever.

R: Ok. Someone who's responsible.

Dee: Yeah.

Similarly, Vinny's idea of a true man hinges upon demonstrated responsibility.

R: When you look at somebody and say, "That's a man," what are we talking about?

Vinny: A man that works hard, does what he has to do, provides for his family and others, and can take care of his business.

R: So then is a drug dealer a man?

Vinny: No. He's not a man. He's just a junkie.

R: So, then, what makes a man?

Vinny: Responsibility. To me, a man, you gotta do what you gotta do.

In addition to participant interviews surrounding the concept of manhood, classroom observations also illuminate students' ideas about manhood. I detail several of these episodes below.

Regarding financial responsibilities:

Sosa: I'm scared of going broke because if you broke, no woman wanna be with a broke man. How you gonna pay your bills?

BMore: Boys like to *get* money, but men like to *earn* money.

Regarding gender roles:

Al: The man goes to work, come home and expect food on the table. No man wanna stay home and raise children.

Regarding show of emotion:

Jay: But you gotta figure, he's a dude (referencing Steve in jail scene with his father). Dude's ain't supposed to show that much emotion. Like, you could show some emotion, but you don't really wanna let it all show. Like, personal problems, you supposed to keep that to yourself. Your mama, your grandmamma, your girlfriend—you can show emotion to them but not to other people.

Al: Sometimes you gotta stay strong for the family.

Perceptions of Fatherhood

The novel *The First Part Last* was the second young adult selection students read. As the novel involves an African American teen boy who becomes a father, one of the central themes we explored through the novel unit was fatherhood. Data collected through classroom observations suggest that participants agree on what constitutes an ideal father, mostly the father's presence in their lives and his ability to provide for the family. However, participants appear to disagree about whether a mother can serve the family in the role of a father. Below are participants' responses to a group activity/ class discussion centering on fatherhood.

1. What words come to mind when you hear the word "father"?

   Provider for me; buy me clothes and shoes; give me money; put food on the table; love; I don't really know because mine wasn't there, but I know I got to be the opposite of him; dead beat; nothing; no comment; a person that takes care of someone; a man in your like that guides you and tells you right from wrong.

2. What should a father's most important responsibilities be?

   Put food on the table; keep a roof over my head; put clothes on my back; be a provider; most importantly, take care of your child; taking care of his family; teaching his son how to be a man; be there for his son or daughter.

3. Can a mother be a father? Why or why not?

   No, because a mother can't teach you how to be a man. Only a father can teach you how to be a man. No, because she can't show you how to be a man. Yes, because she can teach you things just like a man could. No, because things your father knows, your mom wouldn't. Yes, because a mother could tell you anything that a father could tell you.

4. What makes a good father different from a not-so-good father? Explain.

   A good father is always there for you, but a not-so-good father isn't there for you when you need him; a father that supports the family is good, but one that was never there is bad; a good father is there for the child, but the not-so-good father don't care; the bad father is not worried about their kids and really don't care about them.

5. Does a child necessarily need a father? Why or why not?

   No, but it is good to have one there for you when you're in trouble or when you need to talk to him about something I can't talk to my mother about; yes, you need to learn how to be a man; yes, boys need a father because they need to be tough about being a man; yes, because if they don't have one, they don't know how to act.

Participants' ideas about fathers were illuminated through other class discussions and activities surrounding the novel units. During these conversations, participants verbalized their insights and understood cultural codes about the role of a father. In one class discussion, Ms. Clark asked students whether a child needs a father. BMore said, "You don't need to have one, but it's good to have one," suggesting a non-essential role for fathers. Bob, on the other hand, underscored the role of fathers in preparing sons and daughters for their future roles in society. He stated, "I think it's (fathers) good for boys. The father can also tell the daughter about boys and teach a son to be a man. I think girls these days need a father 'cause girls these days are wild!"

In addition to class discussions, class debates offered opportunities to hear specific opinions participants hold about fatherhood. A class debate was held for each class period during the novel unit for *The First Part Last.* Students were asked to sit on the side of the classroom that corresponded with their stance on the issue: "Is Bobby (main character in novel) fit to raise a child at this time in his life?" All the African American males chose the "no" side. Arguments given by participants during their arguments included: Bobby is still in high school, only seventeen years old, has no job or experience, is not mature, would be raising a child by himself, still has the mind of a child, and will be depended upon to be a father to a child. Particularly memorable during the debates was when Bob became emotionally charged by the opposing side's arguments and stood up, yelling, "Put yourself in his (Bobby's) situation! You havin' a baby in high school! What you gonna do now? He's (Bobby) still runnin' around with his friends!"

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to detail through thematic strands the significant findings of this research. In the concluding chapter to this dissertation, I place this study in the larger conversation about African American males, provide a summary of my work, suggest the implications my work could have for future research about African American males, and detail its limitations, as well as discuss possibilities for these limitations in terms of future scholarship.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to conduct a qualitative study using ethnographic methods to explore African American adolescent male identities through two young adult novel units. Collection of data occurred during the 2012-2013 school year at Bayou Central High School and involved classroom observations, student surveys and questionnaires, student interviews, and samples of student work. The results from this research suggest that African American males represent an eclectic, dynamic, complex group of individuals. Such an understanding resists any singular categorization of these young men as "African American males" or "black boys" with the accompanying assumption that they represent a homogeneous group. As such, the research undertaken through this project suggests diverse, multidimensional, multifaceted identities combined with widely varied life experiences and interlaced with unifying threads, namely a common sense of struggle. The questions that guided this research were: How can two young adult novel units engage participants in exploring their identities? What do the voices and texts of participants suggest about the ways African American adolescent males construct their identities? What do the voices and texts of participants suggest about the ways African American adolescent males view schooling and formal literacy? I use these research questions to frame the discussions that follow.

Young Adult Literature and Identities

Findings from this research suggest participants find connections with young adult novels, particularly when these novels contain characters or plots similar to participants' lives. Furthermore, several participants who had previously refused to engage in reading in Ms. Clark's English classes, engaged in the reading of the two novel selections used in this study. Participants connected best with *Monster* and indicated an appreciation for the novel's plot

surrounding a black boy's experiences with the criminal justice system. Interviews suggested that many participants had either experienced arrest, trial, and/or jail, or had family members who possessed such experiences. In addition, the novel opened spaces for discussing racial biases in the criminal justice system, more specifically racial profiling, as many participants indicated having experienced it themselves. These personal experiences of the participants were connected through class discussions and activities to the broader theme of identity in the novel. In contrast to *Monster*, participants did not appear to connect as well with *The First Part Last* (Johnson). One of the participants, Jay, had recently experienced the birth of his first child and indicated in his interviews that themes in the novel spoke to his life. However, other participants appeared less interested in exploring the struggles of an African American male teen suddenly turned father. Class discussions surrounding the novel often turned more toward a teen pregnancy focus, as students continually steered discussions in this direction. While such explorations are valuable engagements for adolescents, the greater theme of identity and how Bobby (the main character) experienced a change in his identity was somewhat lost in the midst of these conversations. Regardless, however, in the sense that sexuality informs teen identities, participants were able to connect such discussions with their personal lives. In concluding activities and discussions for the novel units, participants expressed an appreciation for young adult literature, recognizing its relevance to their lives, particularly in contrast to canonical selections with which they were more familiar.

African American Adolescent Male Identities

Data collected throughout this project suggests that African American adolescent male identities are complex. As examined through a situated-identity framework (Murrell, 2008) that views identity as socially constructed (Gee, 2009), this research supports the notion that African

American adolescent males project different identities dependent upon the particular social scene in which they must operate. Classroom observations and interviews suggest participants' awareness of these different contexts and their acknowledgment that individuals project different representations of themselves according to the frameworks they navigate. Additionally, data collected suggests that participants' identities are constructed by multiple forces operating within their lives, both in school and out of school. Interviews suggest participants' identities are most influenced by the ways they think others perceive them. Their identities are likewise impacted greatly by their accomplishments, both in sports and academically. While most participants reported accomplishments in sports alone, they did not discount the achievements of other students in the academic realm. Interactions with police, teachers, and administrators resulting in racist or biased practices were implicated most by participants as negatively impacting their identities. Finally, participants expressed an understanding of negative ways African American males are viewed by society, and data collected suggest an attempt by participants to separate their own identities from these negative perceptions.

Schooling and Formal Literacy

Data collected through this project suggest participants feel their out-of-school literate forms are not understood or appreciated within formal school frameworks. Most participants appear to embrace rap and hip hop as forms of expression, citing the writing of rap lyrics as one of their preferred forms of writing outside of school. Additionally, art seems to function as another form of self-expression for participants. Many of the boys indicated their passion for drawing, viewed artwork as a form of escape from life's difficulties, or donned tattoos documenting some significant event or person in their lives. Furthermore, participants overwhelmingly expressed a preference for classroom activities involving collaboration, group

projects, and tasks involving drawing. By contrast, they cited a strong dislike for classes conducted primarily through direct instruction or note taking. Regarding their teachers, the boys claimed insight into teachers' motives, implicit teacher codes of conduct, and teachers' roles as authority figures. Specifically, participants claimed to know which teachers were genuinely vested in participants' success and, by contrast, which were present out of mere obligation. Finally, school discipline appears to be a force with which most of the participants struggle. Citing teacher and administrator biases toward white students and academically high-performing students, participants deemed many school disciplinary practices unfair. Specifically, participants implicated the school dress code policies in racial profiling practices operating within the school disciplinary framework.

Limitations

This study has several limitations, which offer some possibilities for future research. First, the focus of my study involved African American adolescent males and their perspectives regarding their identities. This focus led me to rely entirely on these participants' experiences and understandings, neglecting any attempt to include the perspectives of their teachers, administrators, and other students with whom they interact daily in the school setting. Second, this study was conducted with eleven participants enrolled in two sections of an English teacher's classes. Such a focus limits perspectives to those students enrolled in one teacher's classes. Further studies involving larger number of African American adolescent male students and including subject areas besides English might yield a greater variety of insights about the ways these young men construct their identities through their school experiences. Third, I conducted this research at a school site where I was recently employed as a teacher. There are limitations inherent in my relationship to the school site in the sense that my findings may be

suspect to bias or an existent fear that I "went native" during my research. While I have made conscious attempts to guard against these potential limitations throughout the data collection process, the reality is that my familiarity with members of the school family might be subject to scrutiny. Finally, my status as a white female teacher presents another limitation in the sense that, to participants, I may have represented past white female teachers they have encountered. It is possible that participants' previous experiences with these teachers may have impacted my data collection, acting as a filter through which participants responded to interviews or interacted with me.

Implications

The findings from this research suggest several considerations not only for ELA teachers, but also for teachers across all disciplines. First, there must be a broad reconceptualization of professional development for teachers. By this I mean that we must begin to critique from a critical race/ critical literacy lens the professional development we offer teachers, looking for moments when what we offer serves to reify dominant middle-class ideologies already present in the school systems. Because the process of schooling is already itself dominated by white, middle-class ideologies, the very idea of school leaders offering professional development aligned with existing ideologies appears to offer little in the way of potential change from our current course regarding African American males in schooling. In other words, if we hope to change the way many African American males are perceived, treated, and educated in our schools, this will require professional development that seeks to shake up the current frameworks within which we currently operate. Such a radical change will require insights from individuals outside the current system. I suggest we begin with African American male students themselves.

Second, ELA teachers themselves will need to be open to exploring different kinds of literature for use with their students. Too many ELA teachers subject their adolescents to mundane, irrelevant, tired works of literature that they themselves once enjoyed during their own schooling. While canonical classics offer a wealth of advantages for classroom use—and a teacher's familiarity and comfort with these works is one of them—we must ask ourselves if the "tried and true" texts are indeed the best texts for our individual students and their needs. Young adult literature offers a valuable platform for building rich class discussions and accompanying activities for genuinely engaging adolescents in reading and literacy. Because these texts offer themes and plots relevant to teenagers' lives, many students who otherwise may not engage in reading, might find themselves more inclined to participate.

Third, critical literacy needs to be a cornerstone of classroom discussions and reading of texts. Critical literacy allows students to critique various societal and institutional frameworks, seeking to illuminate the ways these function in students' lives. In the sense that "critical literacy can also create opportunities for students to recognize that the experiences they have outside of school are valued as sites for learning within the classroom" (Wood & Jocius, 2013, p. 663), teachers can incorporate theories of critical literacy through a variety of texts that may be more similar to the texts of their students' lives. Specifically regarding African American males, these students can begin to view their own unique experiences more in connection with schooling instead of in opposition to schooling.

Last, schools must begin to reconsider the forms of literacy they deem acceptable, whether overtly or covertly. When students feel that the literacies they value are championed in spaces of formal schooling, they may be more likely to engage in classroom activities and see schooling as more relevant to their lives. In addition, these classroom activities should provide

opportunities for students to work collaboratively. Such collaboration capitalizes on the natural desire many adolescents have to socialize with other students and directs such energies toward productive learning—learning that is often much more enjoyable and engaging for students when compared to extended periods of teacher-directed instruction.

Summary

Exploring African American adolescent male identities through young adult literature, this study has attempted to understand the ways participants negotiate the frameworks of formal school literacies and out-of-school literacies and how they interact with these spaces to form their identities. Although the literature on African American males and their school achievements often casts them in a negative light using deficit model studies (Porter, 2012), it also contains glimpses of hope, spaces for positive change. While this research acknowledges the difficulties with which many of these young men have contended, it does not dwell on these challenges or attempt to use them as justification for the present situations of many African American males. Rather, I hoped through this research to seek spaces where these young men might better locate themselves within their schooling experiences. The starting point for such an exploration begins with an understanding of the young men themselves—who they think they are, who others think they are, who they wish to be, and what impacts how they view themselves. Even more important, there is a need to realize how these identity constructions affect what African American adolescent males do in the classroom. Such was the aim of this research.

Because I was interested in the various facets of African American adolescent males' lives that influence their identities, in chapter two I situated my project within relevant cultural, social, and historical frameworks. I also summarized relevant educational research to inform my

discussions of how participants interacted in the classroom—with each other, with other students, with the teacher, and with the texts. To better orient the reader to the ethnographic approaches used in this research, in chapter three, I provided an overview of ethnography, its use in schools specifically, and my rationale for using ethnographic methods in this project. Continuing, I then described my methods for collecting data in the form of student interviews, pre-study and post-study questionnaires and surveys, classroom observations, and examination of student work. The students who participated in this study were also introduced in chapter three, and I detailed their personal stories through biographical information they gave me during the study. Participants included eleven African American males enrolled in Ms. Clark's sophomore English classes at second and third periods at Bayou Central High School during the 2012-2013 school year.

Insights into participants' lives, their perceptions of schooling, and their constructions of identity were obtained through the teaching of two young adult novel units. With their propensity for real-world connections with participants' lives, young adult novels were selected in hopes that such connections might foster quality classroom discussions surrounding identity. Among several young adult novels examined, Ms. Clark and I eventually selected *Monster* (Myers) and *The First Part Last* (Johnson) for the units. Students read the novels in class over a period of four months and engaged in novel-related activities that Ms. Clark and I had planned exploring the broader concept of identity. Class discussions, activities, and student work from the novels provided insights into participants' identity constructions.

Finally, in chapter four, I reported my findings and situated them within the literature I had reviewed in chapter two. Findings were obtained through the transcribing of all collected data, the reading and review of data, the coding of data, and the subsequent emerging of themes

through the data. Thematic strands then provided the frame for my discussions of findings. Themes included: coping with life changes; African American male identities; interactions with police; power of sports; rap and artwork as forms of escape; perspectives on schooling, teachers, and literacies; negotiating school discipline; connections to young adult literature; and perceptions of manhood and fatherhood.

Epilogue

At the time of this writing, summer has finally arrived. The halls of Bayou Central High School are eerily quiet. Desks from all the classrooms have been emptied into the hallways, and once-vibrant classroom spaces sit vacant, idle, and lifeless. My thoughts drift to the eleven young men whose lives touched mine, and I wonder where they are. Most of the boys officially passed their sophomore year, having been deemed "successful" in their academic pursuits; they move on to their junior year this fall. Several of the boys, though, did not finish their sophomore year as envisioned, falling just short of the dream. Ironically similar to their life stories I had examined under the theme of "life altering change" in this research, the boys' continuing narratives suggest a few of them will continue to battle new changes in their lives. Shortly after the completion of our novel units, Sosa never returned to school; Ms. Clark, his teacher, was unsure but speculated he was in trouble with the law once again. Jay, who this year had experienced the birth of his first child, began to miss school often and eventually stopped coming to school altogether. And Tate lost his grandmother and never returned to school. While some critics may deem the boys and their reactions to their circumstances "failures," I know better because their stories do not end there. The ink on the narratives of their lives is not yet dry, and much more remains to be written and revised. These young men have seen their share of struggles and emerged stronger, even more resilient. This time will be no different.

Realistically, though, as this research has explored, their identities are not shaped by these personal struggles alone, for the world waits with others. Sitting on my kitchen table before me is a recent opinion column I saved for this research. Titled "Times Are Changing" by Charles Mosley (*Daily Comet*, 2013, May 16), the piece contends that black parents need to prepare their daughters to date white men because black boys no longer present viable options for black girls. Blasting black parents for their underachieving sons, Mosley states, "News flash for mommas and daddies of black sons: Those black female medical students ain't marryin' yo' 11th-grade-drop-out, burga flippin', pants saggin' sons who have fathered babies by different women." Mosley then goes on to admonish black parents to prepare themselves for their daughters to marry white men. He concludes with "…my advice to you is to brush up on your confederate history—so you can relate to your future son-in-law" (*Daily Comet,* p. 7). There is irony to be found in the author's words because the author himself is a black man. But what strike me most in his statements are his abandonment of young African American men. His piercing commentary on the current status of African American males simply reinforces common negative stereotypes of these boys, offering no recommendations for change and no hope for any.

Such negative perceptions, while grossly ill-informed and erroneous, are realities that shape the identities of the young men in this study and other young men like them and represent a greater system of racism within which African American males must operate daily. Our awareness of these inequities should propel us to action—not drive us to abandon young black men, to turn their struggles back on them, or blame them for their failures.

The classroom offers an opportunity for such positive action, particularly when African American males are engaged in exploring their identities in ways that offer real connections with their personal lives. A classroom space that values the unique lives of African American males

can offer them a sense of achievement, particularly when the forms of literacy they value are likewise valued in their school experiences. And the joining of their in-school literate lives with their out-of-school literate lives offers a powerful force for the creation of positive identities, something they will need for the battles ahead.

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Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

This appendix contains questions I used to guide interviews with participants. Questions centered on schooling and school literacies, home and community literacies, and perceptions of the self and identity.

Sample Interview Questions

Schooling and school literacies:

1. How would you describe your experiences with school?
2. Which classes are your favorites? Why?
3. Which classes are your least favorite? Why?
4. Do you feel that you connect better with some teachers and their teaching styles? Explain.
5. What are your relationships like with your teachers? Administrators?
6. What kinds of activities do you like to do in your classes? (Group work, taking notes, etc.)
7. Do you like to write? What kinds of writing do you like to do in school?
8. Do you ever write outside of school? Explain.
9. Do you like to read? What kinds of reading do you like to do in school?
10. Do you ever read outside of school? Explain.
11. What difficulties or challenges have you had throughout your schooling?
12. Tell about your greatest accomplishment in your years of schooling.
13. What do you think about students who study hard and make good grades?
14. What kinds of kids seem to do best in school?
15. What motivates you to try hard in school?
16. What does education mean for you and your future? Explain.
17. Is school fair for African American boys? Explain.

Home and community literacies:

1. Talk about your neighborhood, your community.
2. Describe your life outside of school.
3. How is education and school viewed in your community and in your home?
4. What about books? What kinds of things do people in your community read?
5. Are there books in your home? What kinds of books?
6. Do you remember if you were read to as a child?
7. What kinds of books and stories have you traditionally enjoyed? Why?
8. What kinds of things do you read on a daily basis? (books, magazines, internet, etc.)
9. For what purpose(s) do you read outside of school? (enjoyment, school work, etc.)
10. In general, what is your opinion of reading?

Identity/ Self:

1. Talk about yourself. Growing up, family memories, etc.
2. What are your hopes and dreams for the future?
3. What is most important to you in your life? Why?
4. What is it that makes you who you are? How are you unique?
5. What does it mean to be a man? What does a real man do, act like, etc?
6. What does it mean to be an African American man?
7. Are African American men uniquely different from men of other ethnicities? Explain.

Appendix B: Identity Questionnaire

This appendix contains the identity questionnaire participants completed before and after the novel units. Questions asked participants to evaluate the importance of various items with regard to their identities.

Identity Questionnaire

Name:_____ Date:_____

Directions: Please read each item carefully and consider how it applies to you. Fill in the blank next to each item by choosing a number from the scale below.

1=Not important to my sense of who I am
2=Slightly important to my sense of who I am
3=Somewhat important to my sense of who I am
4=Very important to my sense of who I am
5=Extremely important to my sense of who I am

___1. The things I own, my possessions

___2. My personal values and moral standards

___3. My popularity with other people

___4. Being a part of the many generations of my family

___5. My dreams and imagination

___6. The ways in which other people react to what I say and do

___7. My race or ethnic background

___8. My personal goals and hopes for the future

___9. My physical appearance: my height, my weight, the shape of my body

___10. My religion

___11. My emotions and feelings

___12. My reputation, what others think

___13. Places where I live or where I was raised

___14. My thoughts and ideas

___15. My attractiveness to other people

___16. My age, belonging to my age group or being part of my generation

___17. The ways I deal with my fears and anxieties

___18. My gender, being male

___19. My feeling of being a unique person, being different from others

___20. My social class, the economic group I belong to, whether lower, middle, upper class

___21. Knowing that I continue to be the same inside, even with life's changes

___22. The impression I make on others

1=Not important to my sense of who I am
2=Slightly important to my sense of who I am
3=Somewhat important to my sense of who I am
4=Very important to my sense of who I am
5=Extremely important to my sense of who I am

___23. My feeling of belonging to my community

___24. My self-knowledge, my ideas about what kind of person I really am

___25. My social behavior, such as the way I act when I meet people

___26. My feeling of pride in my country, being proud to be a citizen

___27. My physical abilities, being good at athletic activities

___28. The private opinion I have of myself

___29. Being a sports fan

___30. My career plans

___31. My thoughts on politics, such as who makes a better president

___32. My academic ability and performance, such as the grades I earn and how teachers think of me

___33. Developing caring relationships with other people

___34. Being a good friend to those I really care about

___35. Making my parent(s)/ guardian(s) proud of me

Adopted from Cheek, J.M., Underwood, M.K., & Cutler, B.L. (1985). *The aspects of identity questionnaire (III)*.

Unpublished manuscript, Wellesley College. Retrieved from http://www.wellesley.edu/Psychology/Cheek/identity.html

Appendix C: School Interest Survey

This appendix contains the school interest survey I administered to participants both before and after the novel units. Questions attempted to gauge participants' attitudes regarding various aspects of schooling.

School Interest Survey

Name:_____ Date:_____

Instructions: Please answer the following questions honestly. Your responses will not affect your grades in this course.

Please write the numbers 1-5 on the lines below to correspond to the following scale:
1—Strongly Disagree **2**—Disagree **3**—Undecided **4**—Agree **5**—Strongly Agree

_____1. You feel you have better things to do than read.

_____2. You buy books often.

_____3. You are willing to tell people that you do not like to read.

_____4. You have a lot of books in your room at home.

_____5. You like to read a book whenever you have free time.

_____6. You get really excited about books you have read.

_____7. You love to read.

_____8. You check books out from the library on a regular basis.

_____9. You think reading is a waste of time.

_____10. You think reading is exciting.

_____11. You think people are strange when they read.

_____12. You think real men don't read.

_____13. You like to read to escape from problems.

_____14. You make fun of people who read a lot.

_____15. You like to share books with your friends.

_____16. You would rather someone just tell you the information so you won't have to read.

_____17. It takes you a long time to read a book.

_____18. You like to improve your vocabulary so you can use more words.

_____19. The stories and books you read in your classes interest you.

_____20. You feel you can connect with the characters in the stories and books you read in your classes.

Please write the numbers 1-5 on the lines below to correspond to the following scale:
1—Strongly Disagree **2**—Disagree **3**—Undecided **4**—Agree **5**—Strongly Agree

_____21. The stories and books you read in your classes have a lot to do with African American males.

_____22. The stories and books you read in your classes will have a great impact on your future.

_____23. The stories and books you read in your classes make you want to read more.

_____24. You think that reading books is important for your future success.

_____25. You think the books you read in your classes encourage you to read more.

_____26. You feel that, in order to be successful in life, people need to earn an education.

_____27. You feel that school (in general) plays an important role in your life.

_____28. You feel that teachers understand African American males.

_____29. You feel that teachers try to include topics in their lessons that African American males can relate to.

_____30. You feel that teachers encourage African American males to succeed.

31. The best book you have ever read is_____

32. Your favorite character from a book is _____
because_____
_____

33. Reading is
_____
_____
_____

34. School is
_____
_____
_____

35. In my free time, I
_____
_____
_____

Questions 1-18 are from the Rhody Secondary Reading Attitude Assessment. Information can be found in Tullock-Rhody, R., & Alexander, J. E. (1980). A scale for assessing attitudes toward reading in secondary schools. *Journal of Reading*, *23*, 609.

Appendix D: Post-Study Questionnaires

This appendix contains the two open-ended questionnaires administered to participants upon completion of the novel units. The first questionnaire asks participants their opinions on the two novels. The second questionnaire asks participants to discuss various life experiences as related to their identities.

Questionnaire: African American Males and Identity

Name:_____
Date:_____

1. Who are you? If you were to introduce yourself to someone, what would you say about yourself?

2. What do you think the following people think about you? Please be honest!
   a. Your teachers—

   b. Other students—

   c. Your friends—

   d. Your family—

3. List the top five people, things, and/or events that have made you who you are:
   a.

   b.

   c.

   d.
   e.

4. Tell about a defining moment in your life (something that happened in your life or a decision you made or some difficulty/ challenge you overcame, etc.) that has had a huge impact on who you are. Please give as much detail as you can.

5. Tell about your past experiences with your English classes. Have your English classes been good experiences for you? Why or why not? What are your opinions about the novel units you are doing in this class this year?

6. What could your English teachers do to get you more interested in reading and writing? Please explain and please be honest!

7. What are your thoughts on how being African American might influence or impact a student's experiences in education? Or does it influence it at all? What about being African American male in school? Please explain.

Post-Study Questionnaire

Name:_____

Date:_____

Directions: Please answer the following questions honestly and as thoroughly as possible. Responses will be kept confidential.

1. What are your opinions of the two novels you read in class? Would you recommend that other teachers teach these in their classes? (Please tell more than "I liked it.")
   Monster:

   First Part Last :

2. Would you recommend the novels to a friend? Why or why not?
   Monster:

   First Part Last:

3. What have you learned, realized, or started thinking about as a result of the novels?
   Monster:

   First Part Last:

4. How have the novels made you think about your own identity?

5. Which of the characters in these two novels did you connect the best with or relate the best to? Please explain.

6. Have the novels changed your thoughts on reading? In other words, do you like reading more or less or the same after having read these novels? Please explain.

7. With regard to African American boys—how do you feel these novels portrayed (or showed) African American boys? Did the novels show them in a good way or bad way? Did they show them in a realistic way? Did they show them in a stereotyped way? Do you think the authors seem to understand African American boys? Please explain.

8. How have these two novels made you think about yourself as an African American boy? Please explain.

Appendix E: IRB Consent Forms

This appendix contains the consent form and research instruments submitted to and approved by the Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board as part of an Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight.

Project Description for "Exploring African American male identities through young adult literature"

Research Site

Thibodaux High School, 1355 Tiger Drive, Thibodaux, LA 70301, (985) 447-4071

Duration

2012-2013 school year

Description

A unit on exploring African American adolescent male identities through their engagements with young adult literature

Participants

Approximately 10-15 African American male students enrolled in English II classes at Thibodaux High School

Purpose Statement

Young adult literature offers an ideal avenue for exploring the ways in which African American males construct their identities. Particularly since young adult literature contains events and themes often relatable to young people, the genre provides powerful opportunities for engaging African American males in conversations about their experiences in schooling while also encouraging a lifelong interest in reading and fostering a sense of belonging in school. More importantly, reading can encourage the examining and forming of identities, particularly powerful when African American males come to identify with literary texts. A literature unit involving a young adult novel and reader response journaling can encourage dialogue--both student with text and student with other students--providing spaces for reflecting on existing experiences and constructing new experiences.

Research Questions

1. How can two young adult novel units engage participants in exploring their identities?
2. What do the voices and texts of participants suggest about the ways African American adolescent males construct their identities?
3. What do the voices and texts of participants suggest about the ways African American adolescent males view schooling and formal literacy?

Data Collected

1. Pre and post-study questionnaires.
2. Written field notes based on daily observations.

3. Audio-taped interviews with participants.
4. Reader response journals.
5. All class assignments completed in ELA classes.
6. Informal questions asked to students before, during, and after the study.

Parental Consent Form for the Project: "Exploring African American male identities through young adult literature"

Performance Site: Thibodaux High School, 1355 Tiger Drive, Thibodaux, LA 70301, (985) 447-4071.

Investigator: The following investigator is available for questions, M-F 8:00 A.M.-- 4:30 P.M.
Angelle Hebert
Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Practice, LSU
223 Peabody Hall
(985) 414-2217
ahebe45@lsu.edu

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research project is to study how African American adolescent male students construct their identities through the reading of and responding to young adult literature selections.

Inclusion Criteria: African American male students enrolled in English II classes at Thibodaux High School.

Exclusion Criteria: none

Description of the Study: Throughout the six-week novel unit, the researcher will observe students' general classroom participation during a unit on a novel. She will also examine their assignments during this unit and ask them questions about their reactions to events, characters, and themes in the novel. Research will not interfere with the teachers' daily activities or the students' learning environment.

Benefits: Students will have the opportunity to participate actively in the reading, journaling, and class discussions surrounding relevant themes in a young adult novel. Students will also engage in activities for improving their reading habits and skills. Furthermore, the results of this study will be shared with other teachers who are interested in creating classroom environments and instructional activities reflective of African American male identities.

Risks: There are no known risks.

Right to Refuse: Participation is voluntary, and a student will become part of the study only if both student and parent/ guardian agree to the student's participation. At any time, either the participant may withdraw from the study or the participant's parent/ guardian may withdraw the participant from the study without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

Privacy: Results of the study may be published, as well as examples of student work, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Student identity will be

protected through the use of pseudonyms that will represent the participants in discussion of research results. Participant identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

Financial Information: There is no cost for participation in the study, nor is there any compensation to the participants for their participation.

Signatures: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigator. If I have questions about participants' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. I will allow my child to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Parent/ Guardian's Signature:_____ Date:_____

The parent/guardian has indicated to me that he/she is unable to read. I certify that I have read this consent form to the parent/ guardian and explained that by completing the signature line above, he/she has given permission for the student to participate in the study.

Signature of Reader:_____ Date:_____

Young Adult Literature Unit: Assent Form for Participants

I, _____ (print your name), agree to be in a study about my experiences reading a young adult novel and my thoughts and reactions to events, themes, and characters in the novel. I agree to allow the researcher to take notes about my activities in class, look at my assignments during the unit, and read my response journal about the novel. Some of these class discussions will be audio-taped. I can choose not to have my responses included in the study at any time, and my grade will not be affected by my decision to participate or not to participate.

_____ _____ _____

Your signature Age Date

_____ _____

Witness Date

Teacher Consent Form for the Project: "Exploring African American male identities through young adult literature"

Performance Site: Thibodaux High School, 1355 Tiger Drive, Thibodaux, LA 70301, (985) 447-4071.

Investigator: The following investigator is available for questions, M-F 8:00 A.M.-- 4:30 P.M.
Angelle Hebert
Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Practice, LSU
223 Peabody Hall
(985) 414-2217
ahebe45@lsu.edu

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research project is to study how African American adolescent male students construct their identities through the reading of and responding to young adult literature selections.

Inclusion Criteria: African American male students enrolled in English II classes at Thibodaux High School.

Exclusion Criteria: none

Description of the Study: Throughout the six-week novel unit, the researcher will observe students' general classroom participation during a unit on a novel. She will also examine their assignments during this unit and ask them questions about their reactions to events, characters, and themes in the novel. Research will not interfere with the teachers' daily activities or the students' learning environment.

Benefits: Students will have the opportunity to participate actively in the reading, journaling, and class discussions surrounding relevant themes in a young adult novel. Furthermore, the results of this study will be shared with other teachers who are interested in creating classroom environments and instructional activities reflective of African American male identities.

Risks: There are no known risks.

Right to Refuse: Participation is voluntary, and a student will become part of the study only if both student and parent/ guardian agree to the student's participation. At any time, either the participant may withdraw from the study or the participant's parent/ guardian may withdraw the participant from the study without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

Privacy: Results of the study may be published, as well as examples of student work, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Student identity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms that will represent the participants in discussion of research results. Participant identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

Financial Information: There is no cost for participation in the study, nor is there any compensation to the participants for their participation.

Signatures: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigator. If I have questions about participants' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. I will allow my child to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Teacher's Signature:_____ Date:_____

Appendix F: Field Notes

This section contains the field notes from the classroom scene written during observations throughout this project. Participants' names are substituted with pseudonyms throughout the transcripts to maintain confidentiality.

Dissertation Field Notes
Simmons 2nd Period

11/14/12 Simmons, 2nd period, English II
Teacher-generated journal topic on Smart Board: In the novel *Monster,* Steve will talk about how much he hates prison. List 5 things that scare you. Then choose one of those 5 things and write 5 sentences explaining why.

Class arrangement:

FRONT

X X **(A)** X X **(C)** X **(F)**
X X X X X X
X**(B)** X X **(D)** X **(G)** X X **(E)**
X X X X X X
X X X X

A—Nate E--Dee
B—Sosa F--John
C—Bob G—Ro Derick (dropped 12/ 4/12)
D—BMore

8:37 A.M. Students work quietly on journal while T takes roll.
Sosa: "Miss, you got a pencil?" (Had cell phone taken away by teacher at start of class.)
T: "You can get one on that book shelf."
BMore: "Miss, it's two days before my birthday."
T: "When is it?"
BMore: "December 27th."
Class laughs.

Class quiet again, working on journals.

8:45 A.M. T asks for volunteers to share. No one raises hand.
T: "Oh, I love the enthusiasm."
White male volunteers, says he's scared of getting in trouble; always tries to do right thing.

BMore volunteers. "I'd be scared to take a shower, me!" Class laughs. (Was referring to if in jail showers.)

Sosa: "I'm scared of going broke because if you go broke, no woman want to be with a broke man. How you gonna pay your bills?" Class laughs.

BMore: "I'm scared of going on rides at the fair because they break down, and you be stuck!"

T directs students to pick up journal and take out novels to p. 27.
T has Smart Board slide with characters from ch. 1 (pp. 1-43).
T quiets down class, asks for volunteers.

BMore asks to be Steve.
John volunteers for "Tough Guy."
Bob volunteers for Judge.

T recaps events from previous reading.

T: "Steve described jail as being…"
Dee: "His mission." (Class laughs.)
Dee disturbs class; T gives him "the eyes," and he stops talking.

Stu. begin reading parts aloud; others follow along.
Dee combs his hair, looks around periodically.
John looks around then back to book.
Dee continues to comb hair.
BMore laughs, and T gives him "the eyes."

8:53 A.M. Student reading attorney part shouts out "Objection!" as part of his lines. Class laughs. (Possible familiarity with "the system"?)

Class laughs at section about gang rape; John says, "Ah ha! He about to get gang raped!" T tells them they need to grow up.

John looks around and then back to book.

T stops to clarify events, asks about character who told something to get out of jail.
Dee: "Snitches! Snitches are bitches!"

AA students laugh at scene where Steve and Tony throw rock at someone and get punched by "tough guy."
T: "Is that really <u>that</u> funny?"

9:00 A.M. Journal part by Steve (talks about jail scene and his fears)
Bob combs his hair
BMore volunteers for part of Bolden
Dee hears Malcolm X reference and yells "Malcolm X!"

T asks clarifying questions.

BMore: "So, technically, he was there because he had cigarettes that were stolen."
Another stu: "Not necessarily."

Sosa looks around, fans self with book, then back on task.

Sosa: "Hey, hey! Can I ask a question? Wasn't BoBo (character in book) labeled as a rat?" Then "Can I be Johnny?" Teacher consents.

Part of novel reads "Smoking a blunt…" Students laugh. T: "Not funny!"
Part of novel reads "To my moms as a present…" AA students laugh.
T: "I just don't get it!" (gives "the eyes" to students)

John has head down, looks around.

Part of novel reads "Sexual attack of an inmate…" AA students snicker.

T: "Why do we have a flashback here about Jerry and Steve as brothers?"
BMore: "To remember the brothers, the good times."
BMore: "This book be funny; that's why I be laughing. This a gangsta book right here! I'm a gangsta!" John shakes his head, disagreeing.

9:10 A.M. T hands out worksheet (see handout). Worksheet contains a story map students will complete throughout readings (characters, setting, issues). Gives students 10 minutes to work on sheet individually; will check for HW tomorrow.

T allows headphones/ music while students work.
Bob has headphones on, concentrates on task.
Class works quietly on handout.

Sosa: (addresses T) "What you yanked that book out my hand like that for?"
BMore volunteers to pick up the other books from students.

**********END OF CLASS**********

11/15/12 Simmons 2nd period

RoDerick—Absent yesterday; back from suspension today
All students present

R comes into class after students have completed bellwork already.
Students in small groups doing reflective handout on novel.
R hands out permission forms, talks to participants, tells them purpose/ focus of study.

R spends rest of class walking among groups, listening in on conversations.
AA students spread among groups (not all in same group)

**********END OF CLASS**********

11/26/12 Simmons 2nd period

8:40 A.M.
Nate is moved to another seat.
Class noisy this morning; students work on journal posted on SmartBoard:
How was your Thanksgiving holiday? Don't know what to write about? Here are some ideas! What were/are you most thankful for? Any traditions your family or friends have? Five sentences.

Sosa shares journal, says he lost his appetite for Thanksgiving dinner since he "stopped smoking weed."

After class finishes sharing journals, T goes over some class rules again, reminders, make-up work, etc.
8:45 A.M.

Bob has head down, as does Nate and Sosa (while T discusses absentee work).

T tells class how she came to school over the break and cleaned the desks, used Lysol on everything, etc. Tells students how she found things (trash, etc) in desks, scrubbed tops, and cleaned the insides. Warns them not to dirty the desks. Discusses extra points.

8:50 A.M.

Pre-Study survey 1 (on reading, literacy) given to whole class.

9:05 A.M.

Class not cooperative; talk out of turn. T has to correct them, tell them importance of survey, taking it seriously.

R hands out journals she purchased for participants; tells them purpose and asks them to put name on inside cover.

T puts class in groups again for work on handout from last week, tells groups they will share responses and that this will serve as review of novel to this point.

T asks R for tips on controlling her class, that if R sees anything that T can improve on regarding classroom management, to tell her.

BMore says he has a new name: "Choupic," then says "They all call me Michael, Michael Jackson!"

Ro-Derick: I already failed the first semester anyway." Sits with paper blank on desk. (Fri. was his first day back; had been suspended two days. Told R he was suspended "because I went off on the ISS teacher. She kept yelling at me for my name tag, and I kept telling her I didn't have it. So I went back in there and told her off!" He had originally been assigned to ISS for excessive tardies.

9:15 A.M.

T calls students to task to go over handout. T corrects students for excessive talking.

BMore laughs at students' answers.

Regarding question #2 (What is achieved by using a variety of formats?), Sosa wants to "change the subject" because he "feels played right now."

Ro-Derick sits with his head down, tearing paper. Does not record answers during class discussion of handout.

Sosa and John in the same group. John is slouched down in desk with pen in mouth.

Class continues going over handout. T reads question 3 (On the first page of the novel, Steve Harmon says that he looks in the mirror and sees a face he does not recognize. Do you think this book is about a boy's search for identity? Give details.) and asks for answers.

BMore calls out loud to another student: "Put your hand down!" T corrects him.

T yells at class and threatened with punishwork (after students have laughed and are noisy).

T: What is identity?

Sosa: He trying to find out who he is, something like that.

T clarifies, says some people go their whole lives without knowing who they are.

9:21 A.M.
Bell rings suddenly, and class scrambled to turn in materials and books.

**********END OF CLASS**********
Simmons 2nd period 11/29/12

Nate—here
Sosa—absent
Bob—here
BMore—here
Ro-Derick—here
John—here
Dee—here

T going over journal prompt (#5 on handout 4) about Steve being scared.

Ro-Derick: Steve in Juvie or this real jail?

BMore: I don't think Steve really scared. He just saying all this to make a story.

T: We'll start on p. 99 today. BMore is narrator.

BMore: Steve trying to win her over (referring to when Steve smiles at black juror, p. 99).

Ro-Derick not on task; is looking at some wallet pictures.
T gives him "the mean eyes" and he gets back on task.

Ro-Derick calls R over to his desk; shows a Red Cross card; says, "I could use this in Louisiana?"

Ro-Derick still looking at wallet cards.

Book—Osvaldo: She found out I got another girl pregnant.
Class: Ooohh!
Bob: Dammnnn!

Ro-Derick showing BMore his cards.
BMore gets back to book.

Nate looking at Ro-Derick; yawns. Nate looks too big for his much smaller desk.

T clarifies Osvaldo's character; points out he lies on witness stand.

BMore: Yeah! He's changing his story! Gonna get some jail time!
Ro-Derick fumbles with glasses and case, opens wallet.

BMore reading narrator part and Steve part today.

BMore "play argues" with teacher because wants to read the next part (where Steve writes journal about his inner feelings on episode).

BMore cracks up laughing uncontrollably when he reads "homeless men have built a cardboard village on rooftops" (p. 117).

BMore: (in reference to scene where women gossip (pp. 117-119) That reminds me of where I used to live, Houma. We used to stand around on the corner and talk about that stuff, like 'Hey! You heard what happened to ole boy?'

Ro-Derick leaves room with nose bleed, takes glasses. R asks him why he needs to take his glasses to bathroom. Says "I ain't leaving these! They $82!"

John reads part of neighborhood resident, p. 121. Class laughs at his tone.

Nate reads the part of Mayor Guiliani.

R asks general question about Mayor Guiliani part, when he says, "Everyone living in the city deserves the same protection," if he really means all parts of the city. Students say, "Yes." (confused about this response—maybe students didn't really understand question)

Ro-Derick reads the part of Williams (detective) p. 124.

Ro-Derick—very low reading level? Can't pronounce words like Ma'am (says Mom) and routine (says rootin)

T has students complete journal prompts 6 and & (topics about Steve and his father's relationship)

**********END OF CLASS**********
Simmons 2nd period 12/4/12

Nate—here
Sosa—here
Bob—here
BMore—here
Dee—here
John—here
Ro-Derick—here

Sosa enters classroom after having gone to office to get school bag. Meanwhile, Dee and two other AA males are walking around classroom. Sosa chases Dee across classroom, saying, "Come on, give me a lil' sugar kiss." T fusses at them, threatens Sosa with office referral.

8:47 A.M.
T has journal topics on SmartBoard. Students are instructed to respond to #7:
"How would you think your father would feel if he were to come and visit you in prison while you are on trial for murder?"
Sosa—tells T he needs to tell her something about the journal topic. T just looks at him.

Dee: I feel you, man. Don't even say nothin'."
T tells Sosa that if he doesn't feel he can answer the journal topic, to write that in his journal.

R goes and talks to Sosa. He says he just came to school today in a police car, has been accused of two counts of theft, which he says he didn't do, that someone with him who did it is pointing him out. R asks him if there is another reason he doesn't want to respond to the journal. He says his father died when he was nine, and he doesn't like to write about it. At conclusion of this conversation, Sosa goes and talks to T, tells her his story, and asks to be excused from journal.

8:58 AM
T calls students to task, puts character names on SmartBoard and asks for volunteers.
Steve—Sosa
Detective Williams—John

John says Bob doesn't want to volunteer "because he hasn't read in five years."
T: John, you haven't read in five years. You call someone out, I call you out!" Class responds with "oooh!" and laughs.

9:15 AM
T instructs students to respond to journal questions 10 and 11.
Bob is caught texting in his lap. T: Last chance, Bob.

**********END OF CLASS**********
Simmons 2nd period 12/5/12

Nate—here
Sosa—out
BMore—here
Bob—here
Dee—here
John—out
Ro-Derick—out (T says he dropped from the school)

8:40 AM
T reads aloud from novel (pp.153-200).

Narrator—BMore
Lorelle Henry—Dee
Richard "Bobo" Evans—Nate
Steve—BMore

R refers to p. 150, where King asks Steve if he has the "heart" to do the robbery, which ends up murdering someone—how is that odd?
**Dee: Peer pressure made him do it. (peer pressure theme?)

BMore: I wouldn't kill someone—maybe shoot someone with a bb gun, give 'em some pain.

T directs students to board with journal topics: #12 (pp. 141-143): How do you feel about what Steve's fellow inmate Ernie did? Do you think he should be considered innocent or guilty? Explain.

BMore acts out robbery, walks down aisle, pretending to hold gun.

Dee refers to movie, Friday After Next, where character has something in a brown bag.

BMore: Man, you gotta watch Boyz n the Hood! That movie go hard!

#13 Double-entry journal(pp. 144-148)—Steve's mother visits in jail. Students are asked to select passage from this section and comment in journal.

Boys continue saying lines from movies and laugh. T gives them "the eyes."

BMore asks T if she's ever seen the show "Scared Straight," where "they try to scare people into acting right."

9:00 AM

T is reading section about a fight in the jail.
Dee: Lockdown! They about to go on lockdown!

9:05 AM

BMore is reading narrator part aloud.

9:10 AM

BMore cracks up laughing as he reads a part about Richard "Bobo" Evans as a "big man, heavy, and ugly." (p. 172)

BMore: I think Steve's gonna get off 'cause he innocent. Like if I was up there, you'd (refers to T) get me off."

Lawyer in story tells what a character's crimes were. Says "selling drugs"—BMore, Bob, and Dee all laugh.

Nate reads section that says they ate "wedgies"—BMore and Dee laugh obniouxly (p. 180).

9:20 AM

Nate reading aloud, p. 182.

T confided in R that John wrote about his life in a paragraph assignment in August; talks about how he witnessed his teen brother getting shot and killed; has a tattoo on his arm in memory of his brother.

****

Simmons 2nd period 12/10/12

Class going over journal topics from Friday (#20 on sheet, question about film section of novel).

BMore: Just because he come from a bad neighborhood don't mean he a bad person.

BMore—here
Bob—here
John—here
Dee—here
Nate—here

Sosa—out

T asks for volunteers to read parts.

Bob—Briggs
John—James King
BMore—Steve

T directs students to p. 253 of novel.

8:45 AM
Nate looks ahead, staring while T reads long Petrocelli part aloud (closing arguments).

All other AA males following along, paying close attention (even though this section involves a long monologue).

8:55
T still reading aloud from Petrocelli section.

BMore: He used to being in that jail cell, that's all! (Referring to John and Teacher's comments that John sounds just like the people on the movies when he reads the part of James King in jail).

T asks class (p. 276) why Steve's lawyer O'Brien won't hug him back.(see below for responses)
Class finishes book.

Dee: I hate when books end like that.

T asks students "who thinks Steve is not guilty? Guilty?

BMore, Bob, Dee—not guilty
Nate, John—guilty

T asks again why O'Brien wouldn't hug Steve at end of book.
BMore: Because he was black, because he grew up in Harlem.

T asks what might be barriers to people figuring out who they are.
Bob: People, peer pressure.
BMore: Brainwashing.
Dee: That's why people be committing suicide; they be bullying him."

T asks students if they liked the book.
BMore: I loved the book!
Dee: They need a movie for this book.

Nate: Miss, if he (Steve) didn't do it, he wouldn't be still trying to figure himself out, who he is.

T asks if identity stays the same or if it is constantly changing.
Dee: It ain't gonna stop till you get that money; when you get that money, it's a wrap.
Another student finds a quote on teacher's wall: "Life isn't about finding yourself; it's about creating yourself."
T refers students to p. 271, when she personally believed Steve was not guilty.

Nate: Why would he ask Steve if he was nervous if he know Steve in the store?
Dee: Nowadays, he woulda gone to jail just because he was part of the scene. What store you know that don't have cameras?

Nate and Bob look on ipods to find out if there is a movie for this book.

Simmons 2nd period 12/12/12

8:40 AM

Nate—here
Bob—here
John—here
Dee—here
BMore—out (Room 14 discipline)
Sosa—out (Room 14 discipline)

Researcher met Sosa in hallway on way to classroom. Had been thrown out of Simmons' class and was going to Room 14 (where students are sent to wait for administrators to see them). Researcher asked why, and he said, "For talking." Said another student had called his lips "Ashy" and "I couldn't let that go." Also said he wanted to show researcher something. Lifted up his pants leg and showed black ankle bracelet. Said he just got it Friday.

When R got in classroom, T told her BMore had slammed door in Sosa's face, causing raucous. (T already has BMore in first period because he is enrolled concurrently in both English II and III to make up a failure). T said he had been acting up already in first period today.

T talks about lies in connection with novel and courtroom testimony.
John and Dee talk about how they lie to their moms all the time about their homework. Their moms ask if they have homework, and they lie and say they don't.

T puts class in groups to work on identity handout and brainstorm.
R goes to Room 14 to interview Sosa and BMore.

R gets the two boys out of Room 14 for interview after asking permission from administrator. Both wanted to go together. Interview took place in Commons area of school at 9:05 AM.

Sosa says he has ankle bracelet for being accused of two counts of armed robbery. Is also on probation for failing several drug screens (marijuana). Said he is also "a big fan of muscle relaxers/ pills." His court date is on Jan. 8, 2013—may be going to jail for five years.

T wrote disciplinary referral on Sosa today, so he may be out of school for a few days.

When R had to stop interview for the bell, to continue later, BMore said he'd be in study skills class next hour if R wanted to come interview him. R asked what they do in there, and he said computer programs. R asked if the class was helpful. BMore said, "It's just babysitting."

****

Simmons 2nd period 12/13/12

BMore—in ISS
Dee—here
John—here
Bob—here
Sosa—out (suspended)
Nate—out

8:40 AM

Peanuts Comic strip—identity
Students study comic strip on Smart Board, discussion connecting it to novel and to students' own identity—a time when you felt like a "nobody."

Bob: When I was young, I got a older brother and sister; they treated me like a nobody.
Dee: Yeah, like you a slave—get me some water!

8:45 AM

T says she's scared of clowns (referring to growing up with siblings).
Dee: Clowns? Like that book It? (Referring to Stephen King novel).

T calls students' attention to graphic organizer on Smart Board (groups used this yesterday to brainstorm on identity).

T asks class for definition of identity.
Dee: Your social security number.

9:05 AM

Talking about teachers' different identities.
Bob: Them teachers, when administrators come in, they be sittin' at their desk or in front of the class all day; they suddenly get up and walk around, start lookin' at what you doin'.
John: That's like at church. You act different, sit there, be quiet.

9:10 AM

T introduces Bio Poem assignment on SmartBoard; shows examples—one T wrote about self and one T wrote about Steve from novel *Monster*.

A lot of direct instruction today with class discussion; AA males sit idle; some in a daze.

****
Simmons 2nd period 12/14/12

Dee—here
Bob—here
BMore—here
Sosa—suspended
Nate—out
John—out

8:39 AM
Bellwork journal on Smart Board (teacher-generated)
Respond to quote: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, what is genius."

Students respond in their journals then teacher-led discussion.

Dee: To me, it means to follow what is in your heart.

Other students also offer ideas.

T asks students to get brainstorm sheet from yesterday out (graphic organizer on identity).

WM student offer his answer: I'm not spontaneous.
Dee (to WM): You trying to use all those big words and stuff.
WM: You jealous of my vocabulary?

9:00 AM
T asks for volunteers to share homework assignment (Bio-Poem).
Dee volunteers.

T brainstorms with students on Smart Board (graphic organizer on identity—5 boxes)

Dee: Miss, those people that wear those big ole earring spacers, that's gross! (talking about images in society)

Bob: When people post those pictures on Instagram, like that looks nothing like those people. (talking about image projected versus true identity)

9:10 AM
T introduces bookmark activity: Hands out a bookmark to each student with name already on it. Students will pass bookmark around room and write one positive thing about each student on their bookmark . (Connects with identity concept). Bookmarks will be collected, laminated, and returned to students at later date.

Students get in center of classroom where they can pass bookmarks around. T facilitates timing and directs passing of bookmarks around so that each student has chance to write on other students' bookmark.

T collects bookmarks and Bio-Poems.
****
Simmons 2nd period 12/17/12

In computer lab.

John—here
BMore—here
Dee—here
Bob—here
Nate—here

Sosa—out

Students work quietly on "Your Current Identity" assignment (see handout).

T will collect and then have students revisit responses at end of the year to evaluate any changes to conceptions of identity.

Dee offers to T to present his responses to class.

BMore turns in his assignment incomplete. T asks if he wants to take it home to finish so he can get all his points. He declines.

****

Simmons 2nd period 12/18/12

BMore—here
Bob—here
Nate—here
Dee—here
John—here
Sosa—out

T hands out Identity Questionnaire (from researcher) as bellwork for AA males; rest of class works on journal.

8:45 AM
Class is sharing their identity assignments from yesterday (computer lab).

T (to BMore): So your life is all about money?
BMore: Yeah! That's what my life is all about—money!

Dee shares song he picked for his assignment.
Dee: It's about how he was from a poor life and made it to the top.

Bob shares something he picked that involves God.

Interview with John in hallway outside classroom.

****

Simmons 2nd period 12/19/12

Sosa—out
Bob—here
Nate—here
John—here
BMore—here
Dee—here

8:40 AM

Journal: Describe one event in your life that has made you the person you think you are today. Five sentences.

Class very chatty, talkative.

AA males making jokes, laughing about teacher pranks they used to pull in past teachers' classrooms: "The Wasp": where they shoot an object/ paper across the classroom with a rubberband.

Dee makes fun of a teacher who used to tell them "Stop shooting those missles!" (refers to discipline referral term/ formal term for objects thrown in class).

T asks volunteers to share journals.

T splits up AA males after they continue to disturb class.

T concludes journal discussion, transitions to discussion of group work handout from yesterday's class. (novel identity handout)

BMore (asks T): How do you figure out *your* identity? What's that definition for you, Miss?

T explains it is complicated, asks researcher to help explain it further.
Researcher explains multiple identities we all have in different situations and as a result of life's occurrences.

T shares personal narrative with class on Smart Board.

Interview with Dee in hallway outside of classroom.
****
Simmons 2nd period 12/20/12

All participants here today.

Interview with Sosa in hallway outside of classroom

Focus group interview with Nate, BMore, Sosa, Bob, John, and Dee in hallway outside classroom
****

Simmons 2nd period 1/14/13

Sosa has been placed in the juvenile detention center after his January 8th court date.

Nate—here
BMore—here
Bob—here
Dee—here
John—here

Journal topic (teacher-generated): Why do you believe teens become pregnant at such early ages? What would be going through your mind if you learned you were having a baby?

Students work to complete identity questionnaire (participants). Other students finish work on teacher handout.

Teacher is jittery, nervous today because today has been designated as her formal observation date (by the principal), but she doesn't know which class period principal will arrive for. She has already spilled her water all over the class novels.

Continues going over novel handout:
#5 Does a child need a father?

BMore: You don't have to have one, but it's good to have one.

Bob: I think it's good for boys; the father can also tell daughter about boys and teach son to be a man. I think girls these days need a father 'cause girls these days are wild.

Class goes over other side of handout: Boys vs. Men

John: (in talking about women vs. girls) You know, she gotta be independent.

Class discusses proper age difference for girls and boys who date:
AA males say difference should only be 2-3 years when dating, especially for teens. But when older and married, a larger age difference is ok.

John: I just can't date a girl taller than me. That just ain't gonna fly!

BMore: Boys like to *get* money, but men like to *earn* money.

Bob: Boys talk reckless, use slang, be disrespectful—not to every girl, but to the, you know referencing the bad girls)

Dee: Bob got a gambling problem; he's always bettin' people.

Bob: When I'm with my clique, I'm retarded (referring to how he acts with his friends).

****

Simmons 2nd period 1/18/13

BMore—out
Sosa—out
Nate—here
Bob—here
Dee—here
John—here

Class is doing bellwork (teacher-generated): Do you think that most teens are in love or in lust? AND Can you be in love and lust at the same time?

Class has lengthy debate about love vs lust and whether a teen in a romantic relationship can be "in love."

T gets students into centers with plastic folders, each center containing an article in the folder. Students must read article, write three main points, questions, etc. on sticky notes provided, then place them on sheet divided into six squares. Articles include:

1. Support for pregnant teens in school

2. How a baby changes things (costs, etc.)
3. Questions about pregnancy, such as whether to marry, adoption, getting father involved
4. Responsible fatherhood
5. Financial responsibilities for father
6. Teen Dad pregnancy facts, statistics, etc.

****

Simmons 2nd period 1/22/13

Sosa—out
Nate—here
BMore—here
Bob—here
Dee—here
John—here

Teacher has prepared a video to start class with. Video won't work because of school filter (YouTube). BMore shows T how to circumvent filter.

Lil' Wayne "How to Love" video—T shows video as bellwork and intro to novel *First Part Last.*

Video depicts an AA girl who grows up in household with mom who has abusive partner, does not experience real love. Grows up to repeat cycle, gets pregnant out of wedlock, etc. Video rewinds to change the misfortunes; girl gets married, goes to school, has better life.

Students complete journal entry:

Talk about the role of decisions in a teen's life (or in your own life). Give as many examples as you can. Remember, I want you to be able to talk about your own life. Explain how making decisions plays a significant role in a person's life.

Students appear to struggle with deeper thought processing required for answering journal prompt (or they just don't feel like completing it). One WM student asks if they can just discuss as a class instead of writing in their journals.

Teacher had sent researcher the journal question yesterday. Researcher had recommended a few changes to the question. In original question, teacher had wanted to ask students if they ever saw the video and what they thought the theme was. R suggested T also add in the questions about the role of decisions in a person's life (as the point of using the video was not merely to ask if students had seen it). As evidenced by students' responses to being asked to write on the revised questions, researcher not sure students are accustomed to being required to think in this fashion?

Also seeing a negative change in BMore since Christmas break. Seems more interested in entertaining his peers, making class laugh at him, and getting negative attention. Did not complete his journal today; page is blank.

T discusses rappers and how many have bad reputations, degrade women, rap about inappropriate topics. Bob: Not all of 'em. You gotta listen to the lyrics.

BMore sits in his desk, smiling, laughing.

T leads discussion about video.

T: What do you think Lil' Wayne is suggesting in the video?

BMore: Get an education. I have a question, Miss. What do you think the video is about?

T explains video and its themes.

T: What are your feelings about the role of decisions in your own life?

Bell rings.
****
Simmons 2nd period 1/28/13

Bellwork (teacher-generated): What do you "lust" for in this life? What qualities do you have that would help or hinder your ability to be a good parent?

BMore—here
Bob—here
Nate—here
Dee—here
John--here

BMore: I lust for a car.
T: OK. Next journal question: What qualities do you have that would help or hinder your ability to be a good parent?
BMore: Respect—not from Thibodaux High people but from people. (IMPORTANCE OFGETTING RESPECT—what kind of respect? How is it obtained?)

T: Anybody else?

BMore: Miss, what do you lust for in this life?
T: I like coffee and I like to shop.
BMore: Miss, I got another question. What about your answer to the second question? (refers to journal question about qualities for being a good parent)
T: I'm compassionate, have a lot of mercy with people.

T displays journal questions for novel on Smart Board. Students open novels to p. 37 (class read first 36 pages last week).

T reviews events of novel so far. Students have good grasp of novel events. Several students offer answers.

BMore volunteers to begin reading aloud.
Bob tells him: "Read right, man!" and gives him a look.

T asks question (p. 37) about why Bobby (main character, whose girlfriend is pregnant) is more worried about telling his friends about pregnant girlfriend than about telling parents.
Bob: Man, I wouldn't care.

T: Why might he be worried about what his friends think?
Bob: They might judge him.
Dee: I wouldn't care, me.

BMore reads part on p. 38 that says “rubbers” (condoms) and starts laughing.
Bob: What’s so funny, man?? (Gives BMore a mean look)

T refers to p. 39 about how parents think about their child and sexual activity.
John: My mom doesn’t care.
Bob: My mom ain’t never talked about it.
Dee: My mom talked about it already.
Bob: My mom gave me a box of condoms.
John: My mom has a box of condoms under the sink.

T talks about what if students’ friends call them stupid like Bobby’s did.
John, Dee, and Bob say they wouldn’t care.

Bob: I’m sorry, but the type of person I am, I’m gonna judge.

T asks (pp.40-41) about role of father in woman’s pregnancy.
Bob: It should be 50/50.

Class continues reading.
Dee and John whisper to each other.
Nate closes eyes.
Bob follows along.

Do the AA males find this book interesting or relevant??

****
Simmons 2nd period 2/4/13

John—here
Sosa—out
Nate—here
BMore—here
Dee—here
Bob—here

T has students come in to class.
On Smart Board is a debate topic

Debate: *Choose a side of the room to sit on based on the following topic:*
Is Bobby fit to raise a child at this time in his life?
YES: Sit on right side of room.
NO: Sit on left side of room.
Consider his age, his maturity, whether or not a male is adequate as a sole parent to a female child, does he know enough about love at his age to be able to emotionally care for another human being? Potential impacts on the child being raised by a young, single father?

Students are instructed to sit on side of classroom corresponding with their stance on issue.
All AA males pick the “No” side. There are 5 WM on the “Yes” side. (INTERESTING: Do the AA males really feel this way? Or are they only choosing the “no” side based on what teacher might ordinarily assume?)

Students are given time in their groups to compose arguments.

8:50 AM
T calls time and asks for a spokesperson from each side.

Class laughs as T tries to flip a coin to determine first side to present.
Class somewhat rowdy today.

T fusses at AA male side for being rude while other side presenting arguments.

AA male side arguments (that Bobby is not fit to be father)
Bob is spokesperson

--Still in highschool
--only 17 years old
--no job
--no experience
--not mature
--raising child by himself
--still has mind of a child
--baby depends on him to be a father

T offers other side chance for rebuttal.
Other side (that Bobby is fit to be father):

--says anybody can change their mindset, and skipping one day of school (like Bobby did in novel) doesn't mean anything about that person as a father; can still be a great father.

Other side: Bob: Put yourself in his situation. You having a baby in highschool! What you gonna do now? He's still running around with his friends."

AA males disruptive while other side offers rebuttals.
T yells at AA side, says she's giving the other side extra points because their side (AA side) "can't shut up!"

Nate: Bobby doesn't have a babysitter. How is he going to pay for daycare, stay up all night? He lives with his mom.

Bob: Y'all have a baby and see what'll happen.
****

After class, Bob took picture with his phone of teacher's quote on her cabinet:

"When I was 5 years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life."
****

Simmons 2nd period 2/8/13

Dee—here
BMore—here
John—out
Nate—out
Bob—out

Sosa—teacher said he has been transferred from the Juvenile Detention Center to somewhere out of parish; BMore and Dee said they saw him yesterday in Marydale neighborhood, that he goes to school out of parish now.

Teacher gives researcher a card the class made and signed for the researcher to thank her.

Class is working on final novel project—a book review paper.
Most of class absent today—last school day before Mardi Gras holidays.

Dee—researcher asks him if the book First Part Last has had an impact on him, influenced how he thinks about his identity, African American males, etc.
Dee: No.
R: Not at all?
Dee: No. But that book Monster did.
BMore: I liked Monster better because it had more details in it. Monster is a good book because it explained how all of this happened, hanging out with friends, stuff like that. First Part Last didn't do that. Monster was a better book—case closed!
Dee: First Part Last ends as a mystery. I still don't know if Nia died. I don't like the way it ended. Monster told you he wasn't guilty and he was trying to change his ways. I don't see how First Part Last has to do with your identity. They both were good books, but I liked Monster better.

Teacher and class are having discussion about what they will be doing in class after break. Teacher plans to begin drama unit, possibly using Shakespeare.
Dee: What's so cool about Shakespeare? To me, it's boring!
BMore: I wanna read Hamlet. That's the only Shakespeare I wanna read.

Researcher and AA males talk about Identity unit done with the two YA novels.
Dee: It makes you think a lot because First Part Last, when we were reading the book, he was having a baby and we were learning that in health class (sex ed), and the teacher was talking to us about it. (Dee talks about how he liked the identity theme for the novels; never talked about that (identity) last year. He liked YAL better because other books (previous years) he was not interested in. "YAL had stuff I can go back and tell my friends about, such as unprotected sex in The First Part Last novel." He prefers to take novels home to read them alone because "kids in class disturb me, and I can't concentrate." He is more likely to read YA novels after having read these two. "I like these books because they have a lot to do with kids today. Like Monster—you could be hanging with your friends, and they can peer pressure you to do something. My momma talks about peer pressure to me."

R asks Dee why AA males say education is important, but they play around in class. He said it's because they're with their friends, and they clown around with them. He said when he's in a class by himself, he'll do his work and be serious. He talked about this "front" the guys put on for each other. Like when the teacher says to do something for homework, they'll act tough and say they're not going to do it. Then they do it when they get home.
****
Simmons 2nd period 2/21/13 (Thursday)

Researcher returns to Simmons' classes for first time since Mardi Gras break. Novel units are now completed. Researcher's task is to conduct post-study questionnaires, make copies of students' journals, and conduct remaining follow-up interviews.

Class is completely quiet; students have been spending each class period all week doing EOC prep books all class period.

T gives assignment, hands out prep books, redirects some students, then sits behind her podium to do some work.

Class atmosphere completely different from atmosphere during novel units.
AA males sit idle, stare around classroom, don't do work.

Atmosphere at the school overall (and with this teacher, too) is tense.
T tells researcher that teachers were told that "the state" (representatives from state dept.) will be walking around the school all week and will come into classrooms unannounced, observing for 30 minutes.

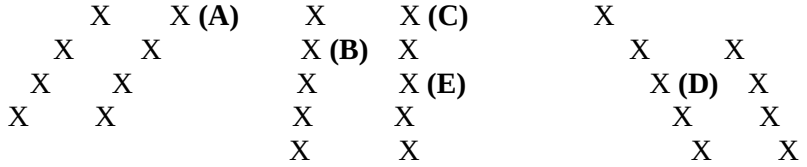
R distributes post-study questionnaires at both class periods and makes photo copies of students' journals. Will return next week to complete follow-up interviews.
****

Simmons 3rd Period

11/14/12 Simmons 3rd period, English II
Same journal topic as 2nd period

Class arrangement:

FRONT



A—DJ
B—Vinny
C—Ray
D—Jay
E—Al

9:28 A.M. Jay: "How you spell opossum?" (working on journal topic)

Students work quietly on journals.

Teacher's room: well-organized; decorated with bright, happy posters and mottos; Smart Board in front; labeled organizer bins on shelf.

One of posters on wall: (oddly similar to the "slammer"/ jail??)

S Sentences
L Length
A Answers
M Mechanics
R Restate
S Support

9:40 A.M. Students share journals about greatest fear.
Jay: "Snakes!"
T: "Why?"
Jay: "They be biting! I see documentaries on snakes…"
Ray: "Parrots."
T: "Why?"
Ray: "They little and someone put that on my head; it traumatized me…"
DJ: "Math."

9:45 A.M. T directs students to p. 25 in novel. Students go pick up journals and get novels. T puts character list on board for volunteers to read parts; students raise hands to volunteer.

Jay—narrator
Al—
Ray—Petrocelli
DJ—"Tough guy"

9:50 A.M. T directs students to page 25

Jay: "Why y'all have to argue with her?" (talking to AA girls arguing with T)

T recaps events of novel.

Al reads aloud very well, fluent and expressive

T: "Catch a break? What does that mean?" (referring to novel)
Jay: "Get out of jail."

Students seem to understand (as evidenced by answers to teacher questions) that a prisoner on the stand would lie to get out of jail.

Narrator reads: "…with large, ashy hands…" AA students laugh, saying "Awe!"

Al: "Miss, I got a question. Why the lawyer say 'objection'?" T explains.

10:10 A.M. T stops reading and gives handout to students (same as 2nd period).

T: "DJ, you're cheating! Stop reading!" (Student had been trying to read ahead after teacher had stopped class; interested in book.)

Much of class does not want to stop reading; they say they'll go buy the book over Thanksgiving break to read, want to find out what happens.

**********END OF CLASS**********

11/15/13 Simmons 3rd pd

9:15 AM Students mad at T because not reading today (doing handout in groups), voice opposition.

One student says “This (reading novel) is the only reason we come to your class.”

T asks students to take out story map to review characters.

Class rowdy (special bell schedule for flag football game this afternoon).

Vinny: Says Steve being held for a murder he did not commit (assumes Steve is not guilty).

T: Do we know he’s not guilty?

T tells class that this novel will not be covered like they have in the past—not memorizing (why have novels in the past involved “memorizing” anyway??), will involve group work, projects, critical thinking, preparing for the EOC, ACT, etc. (Why hasn’t teacher been doing these activities anyway??)

9:25 AM

T has students pick numbers out of basket to assign groups; class talkative.

R walks around to groups. Asks AA males about novel.

R: What do you think about the novel so far?

Jay: I read the book in Texas. I think it’s interesting. I like the layout of the novel. I think Steve is made to look guilty, but he’s not guilty.

DJ: It’s (book) creative; it makes you want to read it; it’s about identity. Steve looks like he’s from the ghetto; that’s how people see people like him; if he was a white kid, it would be different. People assume they’re bad.

Ray: It’s interesting.

Vinny: I like the book; it shows how Steve is feeling, how he’s trying to get out of something, a struggle.

Al: it’s interesting because it’s about a 16-year-old kid that’s getting ready to get locked up for something he didn’t do. (assumes Steve is innocent)

**********END OF CLASS**********

Simmons 3rd period 11/26/12

9:25A.M.

4 participants present of 5; Vinny absent

T reviews class procedures, introduces journal topic (same as second period)

> How was your Thanksgiving holiday? Don’t know what to write about? Here are some ideas! What were/ are you most thankful for? Any traditions your family or friends always have? Five sentences.

R hands out novel journals and questionnaires to participants.

T discusses BMore (in the 2nd period class) with researcher. T says BMore is failing all his classes; she and guidance have had conference class with his parents, behavior referrals, etc. He showed improvement for a while but now back to disturbing class.

9:40 A.M.

T reviews procedures for journals and how to get journals at start of class, absences, etc. Half of class listens; participants look around the room; appear to just tolerate teacher's lecturing. Al looks at the floor; Ray still completing questionnaire.

T tells class same story as 2nd period—how she cleaned the classroom over the break.

9:48 A.M.

T tells students to pick up journals, hands our study guides students worked on last week. T explains group procedures, how groups are formed, etc. Tells students they will get back into groups to finish study guides, review them if done. Will share with class.

Students move into groups.

10:00 A.M.

T calls students to attention. Will go over handout.
Jay goes to bathroom.
Al has head down on desk.

T: Y'all are so quiet.
WM student: That's what you want, right?
T: But I want participation…
T: (going over handout) What does identity mean? How many of you know exactly who you are? Raise your hands. (No hands are raised.)

T: Number 4. Group 1. (Different meanings of the word "monster")

Jay: Sometimes I feel like a monster because people accuse me of things, and they only look at the negative; they assume things because of how I look."

Ray agrees.
Some students laugh at Jamar who says, "That's real talk."

Al: (regarding question 7 about character in novel who says she can barely make it these days from the economic crunch) I think she has a legitimate observation. People might have a legitimate need to have money.

**********END OF CLASS**********

Simmons 3rd period 11/29/12

DJ—here
Vinny—here (had been absent a week, now back)
Ray—here
Al--here

Jay—absent (has been absent a while)

T takes roll
Students get journals, novels ready

9:30 A.M.

T asks for volunteers for parts in novel.
Most of class has hands up, wanting parts, arguing over who gets the part they wanted.
T writes student names next to their parts on SmartBoard.
Students to begin reading on p. 99.

Al—reads part of Briggs; reads very well, pronounces words well and with proper inflection and speed.
T reminds class of Osvaldo's age—14; class remarks at how young he is to get girlfriend pregnant (p. 105).

Students work on journal prompt questions 6 and 7 in their journals.
(#6: pg. 113: Steve's father comes to visit him in prison. How do you feel he treats Steve? What feelings are provoked inside of you when reading this excerpt?
#7: Write a sentence about how you feel your father would feel if he would come to visit you in prison while you were on trial for murder.)

9:55 A.M.

T calls time and continues with reading.

10:10 A.M.

T stops reading, asks students to write journal responses for 8 (pp. 115-116: What does Steve feel is happening to his relationship with his father? Do you think this will have an effect on his identity?) and 9 (pp. 124-126: How do you feel about the detectives taking Steve away in handcuffs? How do you think Steve's mother feels at this point?).

**********END OF CLASS**********

12/4/12 Simmons 3rd period

9:25 AM
Students congregate in front of room getting their journals.
T has a large number of alternate students today.

DJ—here
Vinny—here
Ray—here
Jay—here
Al—here

T reviews webquest activity (on prisons and justice system) students completed yesterday. Asks students for anything they learned that they didn't already know. Female student says that the Manhattan Detention Center has females, and the novel doesn't mention female inmates.

9:35 AM
T asks students to open journals and novels. Puts list of characters on SmartBoard (pp. 127-151). Reviews events from last reading.

Detective Williams—Al
Petrocelli—Ray
Dr. Moody—DJ

T begins reading narrator section on p. 127.

9:45AM
T puts journal prompts on SmartBoard; students work on #10 and 11.

10:00 AM
Class reading aloud. T stops and asks if they think this new guy was was out in jail is guilty.
Jay and Vinny say "No; it should be attempted robbery, not armed robbery." (knowledge of criminal system)

T stops reading and has students write journal responses to # 12 and 13:

12. How do you feel about what Steve's fellow inmate Ernie did? Do you think he should be considered innocent or guilty? Explain.

13. Double entry journal (pp. 144-148): Pick a passage and explain your feelings.

**********END OF CLASS**********

Simmons 3rd period11/5/12

9:27 AM

T calls students to task, has character list on board.

T told R Jay was out yesterday because his girlfriend had a baby this week.

Vinny—here
Ray—here
Jay—here
DJ—out
Al—here

Class enthusiastic, vies for parts in novel as T writes them on board.

9:35 AM

Novel, p. 153

Jay—narrator
Al—Petrocelli
Ray—Lorelle Henry

9:40 AM

Oral reading still going on. T stands up and motions to Vinny to get back on task.

T asks about Richard "Bobo" Evans (p. 173) and his appearance.

Jay agrees that if he were on the jury and saw the character Richard "Bobo" Evans (big man, heavy, ugly) dressed sloppily, that he would assume him guilty.

9:55 AM

Oral reading, p. 185

Jay: Man, that boy slick (refers to Richard "Bobo" Evans lying to try to get a plea deal.) p. 188

10:01 AM

T stops the reading, asks for comments.

Jay: Bobo a snitch, but the lawyers be confusing him, so he didn't say what they wanted him to say. Bobo trying to shake the questions.

**Al: I don't understand what Bobo is talking about, like when he says "Chrome," what's he talkin' about? (not subscribing to stereotypical AA culture? From different background?)

T: It's ghetto talk, like from another place.

T acts out a part from the book in a "gangsta style," explains and summarizes.

**Vinny: Why someone wanna sell drugs to a random person?You gotta stick with your regular clients. (knowledge of the system?)

T: I don't know. I don't know the business.

Al: They be fighting in the church we go to..

T assigns Journal Prompts 14 and 15:

14) Pp. 153-159: Double-entry journal (pick a passage and share thoughts)

15) Pp. 172-173: Richard "Bobo" Evans is called as a witness and appears in his orange jumpsuit. How would this make you feel?

**Jay: They don't eat scrambled eggs in jail. (familiarity with system or has seen in media?)

R: How do you know?

Jay: Just from people I talk to.

Vinny: My momma's boyfriend work at Angola. We be going to the rodeos there, and they talk about what they had for breakfast and all there.

10:17 AM

Jay: (brief interview, not audio taped) (Talked about his new baby girl; always heard how horrible it is, but he really likes it, is attached to the little girl. Wants to go to college, maybe become a mechanic. Likes the novel Monster so far, identifies with Steve because he "is accused of doing something he didn't do."

****

Simmons 3rd pd 12/6/12

Researcher not in class today, but T told R via text that this 3rd period class got really excited about reading the novel. Al volunteered to read the detective part and got up, walked around, and acted out his part. Then Ray volunteered to be one of the witnesses, and he got up and acted it out, too. By the end of the class period, they were standing behind the podium, using it as a witness stand.

T told R in phone class later that night that Ray never read before they read this novel, and he certainly never volunteered to read aloud. Students are connecting with this book and are more motivated to read, according to the teacher.

****

Simmons 3rd period 12/10/12

9:30 AM
T has bellwork journal on SmartBoard (#22, p. 261 novel)
"They are all equally guilty. The one who grabbed the cigarettes, the one who wrestled for the gun, the one who checked the place to see if the coast was clear." Agree, disagree, why?

Jay: here
Al: here
Ray: out
Vinny: here
DJ: here

T asks for volunteers for parts (puts on SmartBoard)

Jay—narrator
Al—Petrocelli
Vinny—guard

T calls class to p. 263

Class obviously excited about reading today.

Al: I think O'Brien won the case.

9:45 AM
Vinny doodles on journal page while T reads aloud from Steve's thoughts, pp. 269-271. Other AA males on task.

9:46 AM
T redirects Vinny.

9:50 AM
Jay reading part of narrator, pp. 276-277.

T asks why O'Brien (Steve's attorney) didn't hug Steve (p. 276)
DJ: Wait, isn't she supposed to be helping him?
Jay: She don't wanna get too attached.

T connects idea of identity and monster in O'Brien's mind.
T asks why Steve still making movies; student answers that he's still trying to figure himself out.

9:54 AM
Al studying his bright yellow shoes while T reads, then looks around.

Novel, p. 280: Scene where Steve's father says he's glad Steve doesn't have to go to jail.
Jay: But you gotta figure, he's a dude. Dude's ain't supposed to show that much emotion.
Al: He just a cold-hearted father.
T talks about men and emotions, relates personal story about how her father is the emotional one, whereas her mother is the stoic one.

Jay: Like, you could show some emotion, but you don't really want to let it all show. Like, personal problems, you supposed to keep that to yourself. Your mama, your grandmamma, your girlfriend—you can show emotion to them but not to other people.

Al: Sometimes you gotta stay strong for the family. (UNDERSTANDING OFMASCULINITY)

10:00 AM
T calls class attention to p. 280.
Class finishes book.

T: Who did not like this book?
Al: (Raises hand) The end is stupid.

T: Who believes maybe Steve did do it?
Jay raises hand.
T: Who says he did not do it?
DJ and Al raise hands.

T tells class she "honestly believes Steve is not guilty." Refers students to p. 271 in book.
Ray comes in late. Sits with bookbag on desk, no novel out.

T asks students "Since the beginning of the book, they've called Steve a monster. Why? Did O'Brien ever give this guy a chance, or did she go off of the stereotype of the 16-year-old black boy?"
Class thinks it's nothing personal and that she's just doing her job.

T asks class if other people's opinions shape one's identity:
"Do you believe you know your true identity, who you really are? Will you have the same identity years from now? Does your identity continue to change?" Asks students to think about these questions.

T asks students to open their journals.

Vinny: Who would do a robbery and not get no money? (referring to why he thinks Steve is innocent).

Journal questions 23-26 (last 4 questions for journal topics)

23. If you had been on the jury, how would you have voted?
24. What vivid images remained with you after you finished the book?
25. What is Steve's project that he is working on when he gets home?
26. Predict what impact O'Brien's final scene with Steve had on his view of his own identity.
****

Simmons 3rd period 12/12/12

DJ—here

Ray—here
Vinny—here
Al—here
Jay—here

9:30 AM

Journal (teacher-generated): Write one positive thing about yourself.

Jay: That I'd never give up on anything, even if it seem impossible to reach, I'd never give up on it."

Novel: T asks if students agree on verdict.
Jay: Innocent. The dudes who say they saw him might of committed the crime, and they just lying.
T hands out identity brainstorming sheet, puts students in groups, then goes over directions.

10:00 AM

Interview with Jay in hallway outside classroom.

****
Simmons 3rd Period 12/13/12

DJ—here
Vinny—here
Ray—here
Al—here
Jay—out

Journal prompt on Smart Board (Peanuts comic strip on identity)

9:28 AM
T asks who is familiar with Peanuts characters (referring to comic strip for journal prompt).
Several white students raise their hands; no AA males do.

T relates personal story about how, like Linus, she has a lovey blanket she still sleeps with, and students can "make fun of me if you want to."

T acts out comic strip, yelling. Students clap when she's done.
T asks students to write about how the comic strip relates to identity.

9:38 AM
T begins class discussion about comic strip.
White female student raises hand, says "he feels like he's a nobody."

T acknowledges responses, adds that Steve in novel feels much like this.
Conversation turns to bullying and identity.

Al: I got bullied in sixth grade, but I laid my hands on them. They came up to me at lunch and pushed me (I was a squirt back then). I fell on my back, and you know, my Dad told me to take a stand, and I beat them up, and they never messed with me again. (PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH IDENTITY FORMATION/ STRUGGLES)

T: Does that have any effect on who you are?

Al: Yeah, 'cause I don't like when people get bullied to this day.

Vinny: I was a bully. I feel bad now when people get bullied. But that was in middle school.

Vinny: Watching the news, I see too many kids with guns and all (referring to how bullying is out of control).

Ray: People kill themselves for getting bullied.

T tells story about how her brother locked her in a tuba case when she was little, and to this day, she fears tubas (and clowns).

Continuing to talk about how identity is formed, WM student mentions that if someone is from the ghetto, they're going to act like that (referring to stereotypical perceptions of people from ghetto).

Vinny: Hey! Just because someone from the ghetto doesn't mean they bad! (BATTLING STEREOTYPES)

T asks for definition of identity, records answers on Smart Board.

9:50 AM
Al: How we feel about ourselves.

10:00 AM
T is discussing personal connections to identity brainstorming. Has been talking a while.
Al picks at button on his shirt.
Ray daydreams.
Vinny doodles.
DJ daydreams.

10:03 AM
T still discussing identity.

Al relates story about Sponge Bob, who lost his ID tag and didn't know who he was. "He flashed out on everybody. Then he found his ID tag, and everything was alright." (UNDERSTANDING OF IDENTITY AS RELATED TO ID TAG)

10:13 AM
T reading example Bio-Poem assignment on Smart Board (on Steve from novel).

Students will write their own Bio-Poem for homework, based on a character from the novel.

****
After class, R went and asked administrator permission to get BMore out of ISS to finish interview. Finished interview at table in Common's Area of school.

****

T told R today that the whole theme of identity with this novel *Monster* has been really powerful with her students and not just the tenth graders reading the novel. T has also used the identity theme to craft journal prompts for her 11th graders. When they discussed their responses yesterday, her students began sharing personal connections and stories, and three students began crying as they told their stories. Several students wrote notes to T, telling her how this is the first time they've opened up like this (sharing personal stories), that it "felt good" to "just get these things off their chest," etc. One student brought T a note today asking if they could do a Challenge Day. (What is this??)
(IMPACT OF IDENTITY FOCUS WITH YAL)

T has recently been trained in the "Capturing Kids Hearts" program to teach teen leadership.
T is not married, has no children, 23 years old, white female.
****

Other info: T told R today that principal told faculty yesterday in their PLC meetings that under the new accountability measures, that it is useless for them to go and get masters degrees.
****

Simmons 3rd period 12/14/12

DJ—here
Ray—here
Al—here
Jay—out
Vinny—here

9:30 AM
T has students get journals and respond to quote on Smart Board (same as 2nd period's prompt).

9:35 AM
T opens discussion to students; many students had difficulty with this topic.

Al: If you feel you're right, just say it. Don't be scared. Have confidence in yourself.

T solicits additional answers based on identity. Reaffirms identity as believing in oneself.

T asks students to pick up journals and take out Bio-Poems (homework), as well as graphic organizer on identity.

T puts graphic organizer up on Smart Board.
Students get out homework and organizer.
T asks for volunteers to share Bio-Poem. No volunteers.

Then Al volunteers to read his.

T asks for volunteer to record answers on Smart Board for brainstorming (graphic organizer on identity).
Class brainstorms on societal forces and identity.
WF student offers idea of media—television as determining one's identity.

Vinny and Ray agree that TV movies about gangstas make people want to be like that.

Ray talks about rappers and how they are portrayed, making others want to be like them.

Vinny: A lot of rappers, like a rapper come from a good home, they get money and they change. That happens all the time.

T talks about how money doesn't buy happiness. Class discusses TV shows and how they portray families and people.

WF student brings up Jersey Shore (TV show).
Al: I love watching that!

Ray talks about how TV shows make people with saggy pants looks like others want to be like them.

Al: I like Lil' Wayne.
AA boys debate whether Lil' Wayne is genuine, etc.

10:05 AM
T begins bookmark activity. (see 2nd period details for activity description)
****

Simmons 3rd Period 12/17/12

Ray—here
Jay—here
Vinny—here
DJ—here
Al—here

Class in computer lab working on identity assignment (same as 2nd period, see handout)

T introduces assignment.
****

Simmons 3rd period 12/18/12

DJ—here
Vinny—here
Ray—here
Al—here
Jay—out

9:30 AM
Class works on identity questionnaire for bellwork; no one volunteers to share.

T hands out graphic organizer on "Struggles with Identity"—students will work in pairs; handout has students revisit novel and connections with identity.

Students quiet, some daydreaming as T goes over instructions.

Interview with Al

****

Simmons 3rd period 12/19/12

Jay—here
DJ—here
Al—here
Ray—here
Vinny—out

9:25 AM
Students work on journal from Smart Board.

9:35 AM
T asks for volunteers to share journals. No volunteers.
Discussion about identity and Steve (Monster novel) and influences on who he thinks he is.

Jay: Where he's from (referring to neighborhood where Steve is from and people's assumpt (IDENTITY AS RELATED TO NEIGHBORHOOD/ LOCATION)

T shares personal story about her own identity and how her parents wanted her to go to law school; she chose teaching and feels like they don't respect her as much.

Interview with Ray in hallway outside of classroom

Interview with DJ in hallway outside of classroom
****
Simmons 3rd period 12/20/12

All participants here today.

Focus group interview with DJ, Vinny, Ray, Al, and Jay in hallway outside of classroom
****
Simmons 2nd period 1/10/13

BMore—here
Bob—here
Dee—here
John—here
Nate—out
Sosa—out

T doing End-of-Course test prep work with students.

Nate—out because grandmother passed away.
Sosa—BMore offers information that Sosa is in jail, "ran away from home," "court," etc.

Students not into the EOC book work.
AA males resisting, not engaged. (LACK OF MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS TO SCHOOL WORK)

(Students completed this in groups yesterday):
T doing handout on fathers (preparing students for First Part Last novel)

#1 What comes to mind when you think of the word "father"?

BMore: Money, food, clothes, shoes…because the father the one who supports me, and he has to buy them.
T asks for clarification, that these are material things. What else?
BMore: Love.
T: O.K. (BMore—MATERIALISM/ CONCEPTIONS OF FATHERS)

Dee has bracelet on that reads "Lead by example"

#2 What should a father's most important responsibilities be?

BMore: Take care of his child.
T: Explain.
BMore: Love and compassion.
T: How can he show that?
BMore: He don't hug me, but I know he loves me. (EXPECTED LACK OF EMOTION/ MASCULINITY)

Researcher: Who do you think has more pressure from fathers—daughters or sons?

John: I think the boy has more pressure from the father than a daughter does. I just don't want to be like him. Like, he did some messed up things in the past; I want to be better than him. (RELATIONSHIP WITH FATHER)

#3 Can a mother be a father?

John: Your mother can't do everything. She can't throw a ball with you and everything. Everybody want a Dad to throw the ball with, play sports. (EXPECTATIONS OF FATHERS/ ROLE OF FATHERS)

Dee: Mom can't teach you how to grow up and be a man. (IDEAS ABOUT MASCULINITY)

Bob: Yeah, your Mom can't teach you that. (IDEAS ABOUT MASCULINITY)

John: I learned from my brothers, me. Cousins and brothers. (ROLE OF FAMILY/ EXTENDED FAMILY)

Dee: My dad had died when I was nine. My mom never talked about the "birds and the bees". I had to learn from my cousins. (ROLE OF EXTENDED FAMILY) I would feel more comfortable talking to an older man than an older woman because she probably wouldn't explain it the same.

John: My brother was kind of like my dad because he taught me everything. When he (brother) died, I didn't really talk to my dad. (MALE FIGURES)

T: Do you have a male figure in your life now?

John: No. (MALE FIGURES)

John lives with his dad but doesn't "talk to him about personal stuff. We'll watch football and be like 'what's up?' but we don't talk about my personal stuff." (RELATIONSHIP WITH FATHER)

Bob: The only thing I talk to my parents about is school, not personal stuff. (RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS)

#4 What makes a good father different from a not-so-good father?

BMore: A good father is there for you.

Bob: And the family. Be a good role model.

T: What's a good role model versus a bad one?

Bob: Like a dad will tell you to treat a girl like I treat your mom. It depends on who the girl is. Stuff girls do to you these days, not the same any more. They deserve it.

****

Simmons 3rd period 1/10/13

DJ—here
Vinny—here
Ray—here
Al—here
Jay—out

T directs students to do EOC prep bellwork in EOC practice book.
Students exhale, sulk, etc. (Past experiences with test prep)

T told researcher that Jay missed school on Monday and Tuesday, came Wednesday, and out again today.

9:40 AM
T calls students to task to go over bellwork.

T has new "questioning system," where she has numbered each desk and has matching numbers in a basket to randomly pull to call on students.

Class seems sluggish today; no volunteers for EOC review answers.

T wraps up EOC review session, asks students to take out anticipation guides they worked on yesterday for novel (on fathers, etc).

Handouts: 1) Fatherhood (5 questions) 2) Ideas on Manhood: Boys vs. Men

T: #1 What words come to your mind when you hear the word "father"?

Other students say "money," "care giver," "they buy you stuff that makes you happy," "stronger," "responsible," "tough love"

Al: Role model.
T: Explain.
Al: A good one.

Class very unresponsive, sluggish, apathetic today.

T: #2 What should a father's most important responsibilities be?

Other students: "child," "be there," "discipline," defend his property," "protector of family"

Vinny: Not all families; some families.

T: #3 Can a mother be a father?
Al: No, because the kid is gonna need a father figure. A son with just a role model won't turn out right. A father's belief versus a mother's is not the same.

Vinny: If it's a boy and the mom is raising it by herself, your momma always kinda soft of you. My dad, he care, but my momma paranoid, the soft one. Dad tell me if someone try to fight me, fight. I see my daddy like once a month. He work offshore.

Al: The man goes to work, come home and expect food on the table. No man wanna stay home and raise children.

Al disagrees with the class that you learn how to be a father from experience; says you can watch videos, learn from a class. Class says and teacher says you learn from experience. Al still disagrees, and they have a debate.

Female student: I'll give you an example—a baby learns how to walk by seeing others.

Al: Or you put the baby in front of the TV. My momma used to make me watch the Discovery Channel on TV. I learned to talk from some of those cave men on the show.

Teacher: #4 What makes a good father different from a not-so-good father?

Al: A good father has to have respect from his kids.
(Class erupts in laughter.)

****

Simmons 3rd period 1/14/13

Jay—out (One student said "I think he be with his baby." Girlfriend had baby recently. Jay might get denied credits for excessive absences.)

Ray—here
Al—here
DJ—here
Vinny—here

Students work on journal prompt (same as 2nd period, about what students would do if they learned they were having a baby and why teens get pregnant at young age)

AA males work on questionnaire about identity.

Vinny is taking a long time with questionnaire. Hasn't started yet. So researcher goes and asks if he's alright, that it looks like something is on his mind. He says, "It's alright, Miss. I'm just stressing because my uncle died."

T goes over bellwork, why teens become pregnant at early age.

Ray: 'Cause they don't know how to say 'No!" and they're scared to say "no" to their boyfriends.

Vinny: I think they tryin' to feel older, like a man or a woman.

Ray: Some girls might see their friends pregnant and want to be pregnant, too.

Vinny: I wouldn't be mad (if girl gets pregnant). I'd be happy. I'd still be there for my child. I wouldn't make it look like it's a mistake.

****

Simmons 3rd period 1/18/13

Teacher told researcher that Jamar was here the past two days. Not here today.

Ray—here
Jay—out
DJ—here
Al—here
Vinny—out

T begins discussion of journal topic (same as 2nd pd, about teens being in love or lust)

Class is somewhat apathetic today. Difficult getting them to share answers.

T directs students to get into their groups for the six centers (articles same as 2nd period)

Today, Teacher and researcher discussed teacher's recent observation by the principal, conducted in her 4th period English III class this week. She received a 2.8 "emerging" rating on her Compass observation instrument. Principal's rationale was that her lesson and class environment were "too personal." (SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT)

****

At end of class period, DJ is wearing a sticky note on his shirt that reads "I like 20-25 year old women from Eastside Catholic." (refers to teacher, who attended Eastside Catholic HS).

****

Simmons 3rd period 1/22/13

Ray—here
DJ—here
Al—here

Jay—out
Vinny—here

T has journal prompt on Smart Board (same prompt as 2nd period, Lil' Wayne and decisions)

Ray: Nobody listens to him anymore (Lil Wayne).

T shows Lil' Wayne video "How to Love."
Class is quiet and engaged.

T directs class to respond to journal prompts on video.

Vinny is on task today; is brainstorming and responding to journal prompt (usually daydreaming or doodling).

T calls students to task to discuss journal and video.
T: What kinds of things do rappers talk about?

Vinny: Drugs, money.
Ray laughs.

T: And how do they usually talk about women?
Ray: Sluts.
Class laughs. (RAPPERS)

T goes over events of video, asks class what video themes are.

****

Simmons 3rd period 1/28/13

DJ—here
Ray—here
Al—here
Vinny—here
Jay—out

T directs students to respond to bellwork (teacher-generated):
What do you "lust" for in this life? What qualities do you have that would help or hinder your ability to be a good parent? (same topic as 2nd period)

T asks for volunteers for journals.
Al: I lust for money

Class very quiet; no one else volunteers.
T: All right. Glad to see y'all are so excited! (sarcastic)

T directs students to p.32 of novel.
T reviews events from novel.
Students volunteer to read.
Oliver volunteers to read.

Vinny is not following along with novel; draws in his notebook.

****
Simmons 3rd period 2/4/13

Vinny—out
Jay—out
Ray—here
Al—here
DJ—here

T puts same debate topic on board (same as 2nd period, about Bobby's fitness to be dad at his age)

"No" side: Ray and Al
"Yes" side: DJ

T explains debate process; much of class daydreams during explanations.

T has students work in their groups to formulate arguments.
T calls class to task to start debate.

Pregnant AA female is spokesperson for "No" side; gets up to podium to speak; references Lil' Wayne song "How to Love" and how Bobby doesn't yet know his own identity, so he can't love a baby yet. (Ray and Al are also in this girl's group, the "no" group)

"Yes" side does rebuttal with "you said he doesn't know how to love, but if he didn't, he would have signed the adoption papers (refers to scene in novel where Bobby and Nia discuss adoption for baby).

"No" side gets up to do rebuttal.

T then gives more time for final rebuttal and comments from each side.
****
Simmons 3rd period 2/8/13

Last day of school before Mardi Gras break.

Jay—out
Ray—here
Al—here
Vinny—here
DJ—here

Students appear to have more rapport with researcher now. One AA student asks researcher if she and husband have big valentine's date planned for next week.

Students are in groups finishing week's assignments, unstructured time. Researcher asks T permission to conduct focus group interview with the AA males. Focus group interview held in classroom with Ray, Al, Vinny, and DJ. (Tape recorder did not record interview) ☹

DJ talked about how AA males at this high school try to portray themselves as "gangstas," but they aren't real gangstas. DJ talks about how he has seen people in New Orleans and California who are "real" gangstas, have no mercy on people, and are really violent. Said the kids here only think they are.

Vinny talked about his AA male peers who act tough in class and at school then go home scared of their parents and actually do what they are supposed to do at home.

Al distanced himself from the typical AA male stereotypes at the school. Does not appear to subscribe to the same AA norms, perhaps fitting in with middle class white norms. Teacher has told researcher previously that Al hangs out with the white students at lunch.
****
Simmons 3rd period 2/21/13 (Thursday)

Researcher returns to Simmons' classes for first time since Mardi Gras break. Novel units are now completed. Researcher's task is to conduct post-study questionnaires, make copies of students' journals, and conduct remaining follow-up interviews.

Class is completely quiet; students have been spending each class period all week doing EOC prep books all class period.

T gives assignment, hands out prep books, redirects some students, then sits behind her podium to do some work.

Class atmosphere completely different from atmosphere during novel units.
AA males sit idle, stare around classroom, don't do work.

Atmosphere at the school overall (and with this teacher, too) is tense.
T tells researcher that teachers were told that "the state" (representatives from state dept.) will be walking around the school all week and will come into classrooms unannounced, observing for 30 minutes.

R distributes post-study questionnaires at both class periods and makes photo copies of students' journals. Will return next week to complete follow-up interviews.
****

Appendix G: Interview Transcripts

This section contains the transcripts from the interviews conducted with participants throughout this project. Participants were interviewed at least once independently and then twice as members of a focus group interview.

Interview Transcripts

December 12, 2012
B-More

Background:
I (researcher) saw Sosa coming down the hallway on his way to Room 14 (as I was arriving for the day.) When I asked why he had been sent out of class, Sosa replied, "For talking. BMore called my lips ashy, and I couldn't let that go." He also wanted to show me something. He lifted up his pants leg to show me a black ankle monitoring bracelet that he had just gotten on Friday for his alleged involvement in an armed robbery. Trial date is sometime in January 2013.

When I made it upstairs to Ms. Simmons' classroom, I found out that BMore had also been sent to Room14 by teacher (Simmons) for unruly conduct at start of class. Teacher told me that BMore had slammed door in Sosa's face, causing a raucous. (Teacher already had BMore in 1st period because he is enrolled simultaneously in both English II and English III, and she teaches both to him. Teacher said he had been acting up in 1st period already.)

Since both students were just sitting in Room 14 awaiting an administrator to receive and process their referrals, I asked permission from an administrator to get the students out of Room 14 to interview them. Permission was granted. I went and asked BMore to come with me for the interview, and Sosa insisted on coming along. My intent had been to interview participants separately to lessen peer influence on responses they gave me. But BMore said he didn't mind, so I allowed. The interview took place in the Commons area of school at a table there.

Before I began interviewing BMore, Sosa said the reason he has the ankle bracelet on is because he is accused of two counts of robbery. He is also on probation for failing several drug screens (marijuana), something he and BMore laughed about as he told me. He said he is also a "big fan of muscle relaxers and other pills." His court date is on January 8, 2013, and he could be going to jail for five years (until he turns 21).

The interview that follows was interrupted by the bell to end the class period. BMore told me he'd be in study skills class next period in case I wanted to finish the interview. When I asked him what they do in there, he said "computer games." I then asked if the class was helpful. BMore said, "No, it's just babysitting."

Interview: **BMore**
9:05 A.M. until 9:20 A.M.

R: BMore, how would you describe your experiences with school?
BMore: I would describe my experiences with school, ok, I guess. The teachers are idiots
R: O.K. Forget this is here. (referring to tape recorder student looks at) O.K. Why are teachers idiots?
Bmore: You know, because they get me in trouble for no reason. I do simple stuff, and they get me in trouble, like teachers…
R: O.K. Like, give me an example.

Bmore: Like, just now, today, when I had shut the door, they gonna put me out. I didn't know he was behind me (refers to Sosa next to him), and I shut the door, and then she put me out and told me to go to 14 (refers to Room 14). And then Mrs. Ayzenne had, one of my other teachers, she had, um, put me out for getting up to go get a calculator, for some reason, I don't know.
R: O.K. So do you feel then that maybe your teachers don't understand you? Are they out to get you? What are you thinking here?
BMore: Well, I think they tryin' to get me!
R: Why would they be trying to get you?
BMore: (Thinks awhile) Man, I wouldn't have most of the referrals I got right now if they wasn't out to get me.
R: O.K. So which classes are your favorite classes then? Do you have any favorites?
BMore: I like biology, U.S. history…
R: Why do you like biology?
BMore: It's kinda fun.
R: O.K.
Bmore: And some of my favorite dudes are in there, you know.
R: And you mentioned history. What do you like about that class?
BMore: It's just interesting. My family's always been good at history.
R: O.K. Which ones are your least favorite?
BMore: English and geometry.
R: O.K. Why do you think that would be?
BMore: 'Cause those teachers out to get me.
R: O.K. Do you feel that you connect better with certain teachers and their teaching styles?
BMore: Mmhmm.
R: Why? Give me an example.
BMore: Like, for my U.S. history, I got Mr. Fred Hebert, and like, he, he, he's funny, but he's also about the lesson plan. Like, I had heard something about, like, how all these basketball teams had got their names from, and it was interesting to me. If you can make geometry and English II and III like that, man, I be makin' straight As!
R: That's awesome. I'm glad that some of your teachers are able to do that for you. Um, what are your relationships like with your teachers?
BMore: Some good, some bad; it's in between.
R: O.K. What about your administrators?
BMore: Pssh, that's horrible right there!
R: Why is that horrible?
BMore: They never give me the thing I wanna get; they always give me ISS (in-school suspension); I want after-school detention…
R: O.K. What is it about ISS that you…
BMore: Man, I can't sit down for eight hours. I can't sit down…
R: O.K. What about…let's shift gears here… what about writing? Do you like to write?
BMore: I like to rap.
R: You like to rap?
BMore: Yes.
R: O.K. Do you…what kind of writing do you like to do in school, like for some of your classes?
BMore: What type of writing I like to do?
R: Uh huh.

BMore: (Thinks awhile). Pssh, I don't know. I could do, I could do a poem. That's easy.
R: O.K.
BMore: That's easy to do a poem.
R: Do you write on your own at your house or outside of school?
BMore: No, I don't write at home. I just chill.
R: O.K. Um, what about reading?
BMore: Reading, I got a good reading level, Miss.
R: Do you like to read?
BMore: Certain books. Like, that book Monster, I like that 'cause it was a good book. Like, I like to read certain types of things that interest me.
R: Such as?
BMore: Such as, like, this criminal thing that just happened with this dude (refers to Monster book), I like that. And, like, a basketball player who goes to another, um, life, but that he really finds out, that he goes back to that other life, playing basketball. That's stuff that interests me. I can't sit down and read no book about, what's it called, like that book I just finished reading, The Crucible—that, that book is horrible.
R: (laughs) What was it about The Crucible that you found horrible?
BMore: Man, you talkin' about witchcraft. I'm not, I'm not like that…
R: Witchcraft?
BMore: Witchcraft. I don't believe in that!
R: O.K. So, that leads me to my next question. Do you ever read outside of school?
BMore: Mmmm. (Thinks awhile)
R: Anything?
BMore: Occasionally, when I'm bored.
R: When you're bored. What kinds of stuff might you read when you're bored?
BMore: Like, I read books that have a movie to it. I finished the Harry Potter series, but I was younger, finished one through six.
R: Do you find that the older you get in school, that you are more interested in reading, less interested in reading, or about the same?
BMore: Less interested in reading. The teacher's just not teaching me nothin' I'm interested in. And I bet you if I was interested in every, in a book that interested me, I bet you I would make a A. You put that Monster test in front of me, I bet you I'd make a A right now!
R: O.K. What about school—your overall experiences in school—what kinds of difficulties or challenges have you had in school?
BMore: Man, when I, when I hit the eighth grade, no, yeah, when I hit the eighth grade, psshh, that changed.
R: What changed?
BMore: Like, the, the school, it got harder, it got harder. Well, it wasn't hard in eighth grade 'cause I was makin' good grades. Like, by the time I got to high school, it was hard--harder and harder, Miss.
R: What has been difficult for you about high school?
BMore: Man, like, I can't understand math, Miss. Like, math is not understandable. I'm taking geometry for the second time, for the second time, Miss, and I still don't get it.
R: Why do you think that is?
BMore: (no response)

R: If you could change something that you think could help you understand that better, what might it be?
BMore: I think we should do like (long pause)…I don't really know. If she could explain this stuff, the thing better, if she can just give us, like, projects and stuff, like for math, a project in math, I bet we could prob'ly do that, get it good.
R: O.K. What about your accomplishments in school? Talk about some of the things you're most proud of, in all your school years.
BMore: My ninth grade year, I played on the football and basketball team.
R: That's pretty good. Now, are you still thinking about doing that?
BMore: (nods head "yes")
R: Yeah? O.K. Anything academic, like honor roll or like…
BMore: Oh, that was in, that was a long time ago, my sixth grade year…
R: O.K. You made the honor roll?
BMore: Honor roll—As and Bs.
R: O.K. What do you think of students who study hard and make good grades?
BMore: I think that's props to them 'cause they doin', they getting' their education.
R: Do these kids get teased?
BMore: Nah, I think, the students that's not doing anything at school, they could get their education if they apply themselves. Like, all these clowns and stuff, they wanna clown, if they can do this, they can get that, they can get that education, that these students that study hard and stuff.
R: So, then, let me ask you this: Are you one of these students who applies himself? Or are you one of the ones you're talking about who clowns? Like, how would you say you are?
BMore : I would say I'm in the middle. I'm about my work, but I also like to clown. I'm in between.
R: O.K. This leads us to my next question: Which kinds of kids do you think seem to do best in school?
BMore: The ones that study hard and the ones that about their work, the ones that play basketball and football and stuff…
R: Those are the ones that do best in school?
BMore: Yeah, 'cause they are on the team, and they know they gotta keep their grades up if they wanna stay on the team.
R: O.K. So what makes you want to do well in school? What motivates you to do your best in school?
BMore: I guess when track season come around, and I start running track, I guess that's gonna change me. I like sports, Miss! I ain't played sports within the last two years. And I know I can play for the school, and I'm gonna be running track for the school. I'm gonna play football next year for my senior year, and I'm gonna play basketball for my senior year.
R: Well, those are some pretty good goals for you. Um, what about education for you and your future…
BMore: Man, my future is I am going to graduate from high school, and I'm going to college.
R: O.K. What do you want to go for?
BMore: Photography.
R: Photography. O.K. What interests you about photography?
BMore: It's like, I'm good at taking pictures, and then I know how to do all the, change all the settings, you know, it's easy, easy money.

R: O.K. Is there something else about photography that you like?
Bmore: The scenery, how you see the scenery in pictures and stuff.
R: O.K. I have one last question about this. Is school fair for African American boys?
BMore: No.
R: Why?
BMore: It's not fair. Like, like (long pause)…see, I, I get a major referral, and I get ISS. But some other dude walks in there (refers to office), I'm not gonna discriminate...
R: You mean a white boy?
BMore: Yeah. And then, he get a major referral, and he get after-school detention. That's not fair.
R: O.K. So you've seen that in your own experiences.
BMore: Mmhmm.

Interview continued 12/13/12 at 9:50 A.M. Location: Commons area of school.

R: O.K. Talk about your home and your neighborhood, your community.
BMore: Um, well, my home is pretty good, um, every day. You know, my community is, like…I don't wanna say it's, like, bad, but I don't wanna say it's good, either.
R: O.K. Where is home to you? What neighborhood?
BMore: I live in Midland.
R: O.K. So you say that it's not good, but it's not bad. What might be good about it?
BMore: Well…well…(long pause) I don't know. There's not, like, a lot of drugs going on and things they be talkin' about. Like it used to be, like for my last year, from last year to this year, it's gone down, but a lot of fights have happened back there, though.
R: O.K. Do you know why a lot of that stuff has gone down?
BMore: The police…
R: What?
BMore: I don't know…
R: O.K. Now what about, you tried to mention some good things. What about some bad things about your community, about your neighborhood?
BMore: I thought we just did the bad things.
R: (laughs, then so as not to press the issue) O.K. What are about some good things?
BMore: Um, some good things is, it don't happen every day. It like, once, I say, like, once every two or three weeks it happen. So I give 'em that, and then there's always people on the basketball court; everybody loves playing basketball. It keep 'em outta trouble, that's why. Some of these dudes that play freshman and play, um, JV are from Midland, they play basketball, and they always on the court.
R: O.K. And you said yesterday that sports were a big thing for you.
BMore: Uh huh.
R: O.K. What do sports do for you?
BMore: Keep me outta trouble. Like, if I was playing sports right now, I prob'ly wouldn't be in ISS.
R: O.K. But this is your off season, right?
BMore: Yeah.
R: O.K. Because you said that you run track?
BMore: Yeah, I run track.

R: O.K. Talk about your life outside of school. When you leave here, describe a typical day.
BMore: Typical day? First off, I would go home, prob'ly get something to eat. You know, I prob'ly go to the basketball court, play basketball, shoot and shoot, practice and see who, wait to see who come on the court and just play people who come on the court. Then I would go home and shower and get ready to eat again.
R: O.K. So what about, like, studying or, like, homework—does that enter into the picture at all once you leave here, like, when you get home?
BMore: I do my homework, but I don't do that much studying.
R: You don't do that much studying. O.K. So this goes into the next thing. How is education and schooling viewed in your community and in your home. In other words, people in your neighborhood, in your community, what do they think about school and education?
BMore: Man, the people that went to (this school) and are doing those drugs and stuff, they say 'you need to stay in school, you a bright kid, you need to stay in school'. And my daddy's very strict about the grades; he always get on me about my grades.
R: O.K. So in your own home, your daddy's very serious about your schooling.
BMore: Yes.
R: O.K. What about books? What kinds of things do people in your community read?
BMore: Psshh…(long pause) I don't know. I really don't know. 'Cause I don't see 'em reading. I just see 'em countin' money.
R: You just see them counting money.
BMore: Yeah.
R: O.K. What about your home? Do you have books in your home?
BMore: Occasionally. I'll probably check something out from here (refers to school library) or at the public library and read it if I got it.
R: So what kinds of things would that be?
BMore: I read mystery books; I read sports books; I love to read about people who were great at sports, basketball players mainly.
R: And what does that do for you? Like, what do you get out of that?
BMore: It drives my passion to go farther in life.
R: Good. Do you remember if you were read to as a child? Do you remember when you were a child, if anybody read books…
BMore: Yeah, my momma read to me.
R: Your momma read to you. O.K. Um, and you just told me already that you like mysteries and sports books…
BMore: Yeah, like, I watch this, the only time I watch, like, a cartoon show is if I'm watching, like, Scooby Doo because it, like, solves mysteries.
R: (laughs)
BMore: (laughs) That's the only time I watch something like that.
R: Um, O.K. Um…What about internet or magazines or anything else? Do you, is that…
BMore: Oh, yeah, I'm a big fan of the internet.
R: O.K. When you get on the internet…O.K. What do you typically go to?
BMore: ESPN, NFL, NBA—I'm a real fanatic for sports.
R: And what are you looking up on those sites?
BMore: I'm looking up the scores, to see the highlights of games that I wasn't able to watch, stuff like that.
R: O.K. In general, what is your opinion of reading?

BMore: It's good.
R: O.K. Now, it's, it's good—you know I'm not going to accept that as a plain answer. Give me a little bit more on that. What is your opinion about reading?
BMore: It's good to read, but sometimes it's good not to read.
R: Why would it be good not to read sometimes?
BMore: 'Cause sometimes…psshh…you don't feel like reading. And then if you're bored, you just gotta find something else to do.
R: Such as?
BMore: Such as, go outside, go to somebody's house, you know.
R: O.K.
BMore: Do the typical thing.
R: O.K. Let's switch gears for a second, and let's talk about you.
BMore: (excited) All right!
R: Talk about yourself. Tell me about growing up, family memories, anything you care to share.
BMore: Growing up…I think my life was tough when I was younger, but now that I got older, I don't think it's tough no more. Like, memories, I have a whole bunch of memories. Like, the first time I went to the movies, I went to see Men in Black with my brother and my momma and her boyfriend, and I was living in Baltimore at the time.
R: Baltimore?
BMore: Yeah.
R: O.K.
BMore: And then, another memory is when I had went with my brother, I had saw my brother for, like, the first time in years, and that was back in '07. I have a whole bunch of memories.
R: O.K. Why did you see your brother for…
BMore: Because he had moved to Miami where his daddy…and then he went back to Louisiana now, and he still lives there.
R: O.K. Let's go back to the Men in Black movie. Why was that a special memory for you?
BMore: 'Cause that's the first movie I went to go see with my family.
R: O.K. And about how old were you then?
BMore: About eight.
R: About eight?
BMore: Yeah.
R: O.K. Has anything happened in your life that has been, like, a big thing that's happened that was something disastrous or a challenge or something bad in your life that has impacted who you are?
BMore: (long pause) I'm trying to think…(long pause)…pshhh…I, I don't know.
R: (laughing) Yes, you do.
BMore: Influenced my life, anything that impacted my life, ummm…
R: When you look back over your life, has there been anything that's happened in your life that has made a big impact on you?
BMore: (long pause)
R: Maybe you learned a lesson from it, or maybe it made you feel better about yourself, or maybe it was an accomplishment, or…
BMore: Accomplishment…psshh (long pause)…Oh, wait. Playing biddy basketball…
R: Playing biddy basketball?
BMore: In Baltimore.

R: In Baltimore.
BMore: Yeah.
R: O.K. What was special about that?
BMore: I won MVP.
R: Oh, that's awesome! MVP. O.K. Um, what about, um, your hopes and dreams for the future? What are you, um…
BMore: I was hoping for, like, when I go to college, I would get drafted to play basketball, football, or, like, run track for the Olympics, but my chances are fading away 'cause I had played two years now, so…I'm prob'ly hoping for photography as my major.
R: Photography?
BMore: Yes, ma'am.
R: O.K. That's awesome! Um, what is the most important thing to you in your life, if you had to pick something?
BMore: Family. Family over everything.
R: Why?
BMore: 'Cause who else gonna be around when you in time of need? Your family.
R: O.K. Is that who makes you who you are?
BMore: Yes, my family.
R: O.K. How is Rashon unique? How are you not like anybody else?
BMore: How am I unique?
R: How are you different from everybody else?
BMore: I dress different than everybody else.
R: You dress different? (pointing out his uniform) You got the same thing on everybody else has on today.
BMore: No, like, I have my pants tucked in my socks, Miss, and, you know…
R: You got your pants tucked in your socks?
BMore: Yeah. That's unique, so, so, and then, nobody else is tryin' to do.
R: You trying to set a trend?
BMore: Yeah.
R: Yeah? (laughing)
BMore: I hope somebody will follow.
R: (laughing) O.K. Anything else about you that's different from anybody else?
BMore: No.
R: 'Cause that's kind of, like, on the outside. That's, like, your appearance. Is there anything else on the inside that makes you different from everybody else?
BMore: Like, when I play sports, I know I'm good; I know I can beat these dudes with a blowout, but I just make it a game, just for fun 'cause I don't want, I don't like winning all the time. Losing's part of it, too (pause)…'cause, you know, it's up, it's how I gotta, I gotta keep some of that stuff balled up, Miss.
R: (laughing) Is that, is that for a certain image? Is that, is that for your image? Is that…
BMore: I don't want everybody to think I'm the best player at school…
R: Why? Why would you not want everybody to think that you're the best player at school?
BMore: 'Cause what, what would be the fun of that? Everybody would just pass me the ball all the time. I want other people to have a chance to shoot, to shine.
R: So it's not about being cool or anything?
BMore: Nah, it's just about letting other people shine. I can't be the ball hog.

R: That's pretty cool. Um, let's get to another quick question. What does it mean to be a man, like, a man, like, everybody always says, 'Ooh, um, you know, act like a man.' What does it mean to be a man? Like, what's a real man?
BMore: (pause) A real man? In my eyes, it's somebody that can pay the bills, somebody that has a house, somebody that has a job and has money in their pocket. That's what makes a man. And that means you're ready for the world, and you're ready for anything that comes at you 'cause you know you a man 'cause you can stand up on your own feet with nobody else's help.
R: That's very good. I mean, I'm amazed that, that you think that way already. That's a mature thinking process. Um, so let me ask you this—if somebody comes around, and they have a big wad of cash in their pocket, but they don't have a job, is that a man?
BMore: No.
R: O.K. What does it mean to be an African American man?
BMore: The same thing—having money in your pocket, having a job, paying your bills, and having a house and not being on the streets. Like, these other dudes on the corner prob'ly on the street right now while I'm at school. Need to stay in school, go back to school, do something—gotta make sure you stay off the streets…'cause the streets will put you in jail.
R: So school to you is a way to stay off the streets.
BMore: Yes.
R: O.K. Good. Let me ask you one more question—Are African American men uniquely different from men of other ethnicities? In other words, are African American men uniquely different from, say, like, a white man?
BMore: To me, everybody equal.
R: O.K. So you wouldn't say that there's anything unique about you guys, as…
BMore: Well, our skin color. That's it.
R: O.K. There's nothing culturally or, like, with regard to, like, music or things that you're into?
BMore: Oh, yeah, rap music and stuff like that. We a, we big fans of that.
R: Rap music?
BMore: Yeah, rap music. We big fans.
R: Why do you think rap music is big for African American males?
BMore: Psshh…(pause) I don't know. People just like it. It's, it's different than other music. It's different. Everybody around here, they got a lotta dudes that are rappin' at school, that live in my neighborhood, Crosstown, Marydale, all that.
R: Do you think there's something in the raps that speak to these guys or something that…
BMore: Prob'ly how they go, prob'ly, like…how they would, how they sound, how they talk, how they speak. Like, I don't know, Miss. I can't explain it.
R: Is it, like, the beat?
BMore: Yeah, it's prob'ly, like, the beat and the lyrics, put together.
R: O.K. Who are some of your artists, rap artists, that you really like, that you connect with?
BMore: Um, Lil' Wayne, Tupac, Biggie (?)…who else?
R: Is there a song out there, in particular, right now that you really connect with or that you have connected with in the past, something that means something to you?
BMore: (pause) They got a lotta songs, but I don't know which ones to pick, like…
R: Can you just name a few?
BMore: Psshhh (long pause)…I, I can't.
R: 'Cause I'm clueless; I don't know any of them, so…
BMore: Um, like, it's a whole mix. He call it 'Dedication 4,' if you listen to it…

R: Dedication what?
BMore: Four.
R: Four?
BMore: Uh huh.
R: O.K. And who is that by?
BMore: Lil' Wayne.
R: Lil' Wayne?
BMore: Uh huh. I think he's got rappers like Boosie (?), who spins real rap about the streets and stuff, how they been through it all. Um, that's it.
R: O.K. One last thing 'cause we're just about done. You talk about the streets a lot and how education is to keep you off the streets. Do you have any experience at all with the streets, or have you had any friends or relatives or people that you've seen on the streets that you're, like, 'That's what I don't want to be like'? Like, is there anything personal with you that you've experienced?
BMore: My brother going to jail from being on the streets.
R: Your brother going to jail from being on the streets.
BMore: Yeah.
R: O.K. Explain.
BMore: I can't, Miss. It's hard to explain.
R: O.K. Do you remember? Like, how old were you?
BMore: Mmm…A couple of years ago, Miss.
R: O.K. Was this a, was this a drug thing?
BMore: No, he...Yeah, it was.
R: O.K. (pause) O.K.
BMore: All right, Miss.
R: Well, Rashon, that's the end of our interview. Thank you very much for your time.

Interview: 12/12/12 at 10:00 A.M. Location: In hallway outside classroom 224.
Jay

R: To start off, I'm going to ask you a couple of questions about school. How would you describe your experiences with school.
Jay: It's like a no-brainer, to go ahead and finish school, like I wanna be the first person to finish, get outta school and continue on to college, like that. So school really help to push me into doin' lots of things, like football, school's pushing me to do that, basketball, school's pushing me to do that.
R: O.K. So you find that, like, that sports and school for you are kind of working together.
Jay: Mmhmm.
R: O.K. Which classes are your favorites and why?
Jay: Like, reading, you could read all kinds of books, find out about, talk like we're talking now. Algebra, 'cause I just love math, like counting money.
R: O.K. And when you say reading, you mean, like, your English classes?
Jay: Mmhmm.
R: O.K. Which ones are your least favorites?

Jay: Civics. Civics and (long pause)…just civics.
R: What is it about civics that you don't like?
Jay: Like, it's kinda complicated and gets boring.
R: O.K. Do you think it's boring because of the subject matter or do you think it's boring because of the way the class is done?
Jay: It's just the class, the way the class is.
R: What is it about the class that might not be as interesting?
Jay: Like, all we do in there is just take notes. Like, she give us a bunch of stuff to do.
R: So then is it meaningful to you or no?
Jay: Yeah, it's meaningful.
R: It's meaningful? Explain that.
Jay: It's like, without it, you can't really go nowhere without it.
R: With civics?
Jay: Mmhmm.
R: O.K. Interesting. O.K. Do you feel that you connect better with certain teachers than with other teachers.
Jay: No. I get along with all the teachers the same way. No one should be treated differently.
R: So do you find that you have a close relationship with all your teachers then?
Jay: It's the same with all the teachers.
R: O.K. What kinds of activities do you like to do in your classes?
Jay: Like, projects and stuff like that but not, like, when I gotta write, like, long paragraphs and stuff like that. That's the only thing I don't like doing.
R: O.K. You don't like writing long paragraphs. Well, that leads me to our next question. Do you like to write?
Jay: Some of the time, like, it's just like, you know, with certain stuff, like talking about stuff, like what you like to do, what you want to do, like, stuff like that, expressing yourself, stuff like that. That's what I like to write about.
R: So, then, personal writing.
Jay: Mmhmm.
R: O.K. Do you ever write outside of school?
Jay: Not, you know, not really.
R: O.K. You don't keep, like, a journal, write letters, anything like that.
Jay: No.
R: O.K. What about reading?
Jay: Some, sometimes. It depends on what I'm doing.
R: Do you like reading?
Jay: Yeah.
R: O.K. If you read outside of school, what kinds of things do you read?
Jay: Prob'ly big books, novels, fictional novels, sports books, magazines, stuff like that
R: O.K. What about in school? What's the best thing that you've read that you remember?
Jay: Like, out of books?
R: Mmhmm.
Jay: Monster.
R: You like Monster? What is it about Monster that you like?
Jay: It, like, really relate to me and how, how you can be accused of something that you didn't even do.

R: O.K. You said that it can relate to you, when you can be accused of something you haven't done. How does that relate to you?
Jay: Like, let me see…
R: You can be honest here.
Jay: One time, all right, my house got set on fire, and it wasn't me, but they blamed me 'cause I had the matchbox in my hand, and it was my little brother, and he had it in his hand, and he burned it, and it dropped.
R: Your whole house caught on fire.
Jay: Mmhmm.
R: Wow. Were they able to save anything?
Jay: The house is all gone.
R: Wow. How long ago did that happen?
Jay: That was, like, way, way back then, like, when I was still little, little.
R: O.K. This leads me to my next question. What challenges or difficulties have you faced in school?
Jay: Like, just, just being in school, coming to school, dealing with the people in school, fights, stuff like that.
R: O.K. You say just being in school and dealing with people in school. Who are you specifically talking about? Like, students or teachers?
Jay: Students.
R: O.K. What's your biggest difficulty with the students?
Jay: It's like, somebody come up to me and say something, it's hard for me not to say nothin' back and cause a commotion and get into something.
R: O.K. Has that ever happened to you before, where it actually escalated into some sort of…
Jay: Yeah, a few times, 'cause, you know, like when I was in sixth grade, I used to be small, so people used to tend to pick on me. So one day, I just blacked out, had to fight
R: O.K. What about at this school now? Have you had issues with that kind of thing before…
Jay: Yeah, out of school, when it gets out of school, yeah.
R: O.K. So you find that things are more controlled here, but then when you leave school, that's where you can encounter some problems, too?
Jay: Yeah.
R: O.K. I'm going to get to that in a minute. What's your greatest accomplishment that you've had in your years of schooling, that you can remember?
Jay: Having all As and Bs for first through fifth grade.
R: O.K. So all As and Bs, first through fifth grade. That's great. So you were on the honor roll.
Jay: Mmhmm.
R: O.K. Have you been able to repeat that since?
Jay: No.
R: O.K. Why do you think so?
Jay: Just how my family and stuff been doin'; my great grandma died; after that, everything started going downhill.
R: O.K. So you think that your family situation could be a big influence on your performance in school.
Jay: Yeah.
R: O.K. What do you think of students who try hard and study hard and make good grades?

Jay: They should keep doin' it so they'll get out of school, get a good job, make good money, support their family.
R: O.K. So that leads into another question—the purpose of school and education. What are you here for?
Jay: Like, really, to learn and to do better in life, like, learn life in school so when you get out, you can do your best in everything.
R: O.K. So then is school fair—just being honest—for African Americans?
Jay: Yeah, it's fair.
R: O.K. And I'm being real here. Do you think that you guys get treated fairly?
Jay: Yeah, we do. It's just the conflicts we have between each other.
R: O.K. You mean the African American students.
Jay: Mmhmm.
R: O.K. So if you get written up, and you get sent down to the office, do you get treated as fairly as anybody else, you feel?
Jay: Yes.
R: O.K. All right. Um, let's switch, then, really quickly, to your home and community. Talk about your neighborhood and your community.
Jay: Like, where I stay at right now, it's really not, really all good 'cause you got, anywhere you look, you could find drugs; anywhere you go, somebody buying alcohol for young children. Like, like, if you, if you step outside, there's a chance you get shot, like that
R: O.K. This seems like a difficult situation, then. Is this something, though, that you're like, well, I grew up here, and this is my, this is my home? Or is this, like, I want to get out of here as soon as I can?
Jay: You want to, you want to get out as soon as you can and get everybody you know out
R: What's your vision of a place that you would like to move everybody to?
Jay: Like, somewhere, like, more civilized, like, where crime really ain't that high, where you really can do something.
R: O.K. Describe your life outside of school. When you leave here in the afternoon, what's your typical day like?
Jay: Like, I just go inside the house, and if somebody come over, we probably just chill outside or chill in the house or go to the park or something and play basketball. It depends. If it's a girl, we're chillin' inside all day.

Interview continued 12/18/12
Location: Upstairs hallway, outside of classroom.

R: O.K. I want to talk about your latest life event—becoming a dad. How has that changed you? And what have you learned from that experience? And, just, talk about it.
Jay: Like, it, it really make me do everything, like, try harder in everything I do. Like, like, I wanna do everything for her (his baby), give her everything. So that push me to really go out there and get it, like finish school, sports, it push me to do that, all that.
R: So how do you think that it has changed you, or has it changed you as a person?
Jay: It has. It, like, it really, like, open up my eyes and make me really see how life should really be and what I should do and what I should not do.
R: O.K. What are your future plans for when you finish high school? What do you want to do?
Jay: Go to college, finish college, have a nice job, take care of my family.

R: What kinds of things do you see yourself maybe majoring in or doing as your lifetime career?
Jay: I really, I really haven't been thinkin' about that…too much…
R: Is there something that you're drawn to? I mean, do you like science, do you like math, do you like fixing things, do you like working with your hands, do you like helping people, what…
Jay: Yeah. Working with my hands and, and really helping people.
R: O.K. Talk about your community for a moment, if you don't mind. Let's back up a little bit. Your neighborhood. Where do you live, and you don't have to give me a street address, but do you live in a certain part of town, do you live in a certain town, do you live in Houma or Thibodaux? Where do you live? And tell me about your community, your neighborhood.
Jay: I live in Crosstown, and, like, it's like, a little smaller town; you could walk everywhere…(pause) You see a lot of people, you see most of the same people every day, so, like, dealing with other people…people really don't, it's friendly people; they speak to you, and, like, any way it goes, you could still get shot or something 'cause you still got the dudes out there that's doin' wrong.
R: O.K. Does your daughter live with you there?
Jay: No.
R: O.K. If she did, would you say that that would be a good place for you to raise her?
Jay: No.
R: O.K. In your mind, then, where might be a good place—not, not where—but what kind of environment or what kind of neighborhood…
Jay: Like, a peaceful neighborhood that, like, the crime rate is down and you don't have, like, a whole bunch of people, like somewhere quiet.
R: O.K. What do you think is your best way to get out of there?
Jay: To finish school.
R: O.K. O.K. Um, what about education for you? Is education a big thing for you, is it just kind of, like, trying to get by and just kind of putting up with what you have here, or is it a ticket to somewhere, or how does education function in your life?
Jay: It's, it's a ticket to bigger and better things.
R: O.K. Do you think that—and this is just being honest—don't tell me what I want to hear; tell me what you think: Is school fair for African American boys?
Jay: Yeah, everybody get treated the same way.
R: O.K. As other African American boys? Or as white boys do?
Jay: It's like a little bit of both. It, like, we be treated like, like we white boys but, like, when it come down to somethin', like somethin' major, prob'ly, prob'ly change a little bit. 'Cause they'll prob'ly think 'since he black, yeah, he did that'.
R: O.K. Do you think there's a greater burden or a greater assumption that people have that just because you're black, that you are probably guilty, that you have to overcome that?
Jay: Yeah.
R: Have you ever had any dealings with the, with the office as far as referrals and things that have been, where you have experienced that?
Jay: No.
R: No. O.K. Um, what about reading and books and writing—do you do any of that outside of school?
Jay: I do, I do a little bit of reading, like, every now and then, when I ain't got nothin' to do.
R: O.K. What kinds of things would you say you read?

Jay: Novels, fictional books, nonfictional—all that, scientific-type stuff, basketball and stuff like that.
R: O.K. What, is there, is there a book that stands out in your mind as something that has either, like, impacted your life or you just remember as being a great book that you read?
Jay: Monster—that's a great book.
R: Monster. O.K. What do you like about Monster?
Jay: It's, like, really funny because they got people today that relate exactly like that, went through the same thing, but at the same time, you young, you in my position and, like, where he (main character Steve) come from, that's like where I come from. There's a chance of me being accused of something I didn't do.
R: O.K. What is your motto on life? Like, is there, like, a quote that you live by or some kind of creed that you live by or some kind of saying that you live by or something that motivates you, that drives your life?
Jay: Self Made, 'cause I'm a self-made person. That's why I got it tattooed on me.
R: What does that mean that you are a "self-made" person?
Jay: It's, like, nobody can make you. Like, nobody can make you do anything; I'm my own person.
R: That is awesome. Very good. O.K. So you're in charge of your life, then. Does that, does that bring about anything with God? Does that have anything to do with God? Is, does that, how does that work?
Jay: It really don't have no relation, relation to Him, but He always there, He watching over me right now, so…
R: O.K. Does, does your faith have a big part in your life or not?
Jay: (pause) Not really. Just, just keep believin' that you can do somethin', you gonna get it done.
R: O.K. Um, one last thing: What makes you who you are? What makes Jamar unique? Why, what makes you who you are?
Jay: Like…just my personality and my height.
R: (laughs) Your height. Now, how would you, how would you describe your personality?
Jay: Like, funny. Like, I like to talk, like, really have conversations. Everything I say is real; ain't nothin' gonna be fake that I said. You know…
R: O.K. And I know that we have talked about this before, too. Backing up to the classroom really quickly, is it a good thing for you if you are known as a smart guy who studies a lot, or is it a bad thing as far as your reputation is concerned?
Jay: It's really, like, a good thing because it really don't, it really don't even really matter to me because nobody could tell me nothin' to get me down.
***Stopped tape: teacher's meeting dismissing from nearby classroom, loud sound of heels in hallway, and curious people distracting participant. Brief pause to allow passersby to leave hall. Resume several minutes later.
R: O.K. We were talking about reputations regarding studying and everything. If a guy studies a lot, is he, like, worried, particularly, like, a black guy—is he worried about his reputation, that it, is it a good thing for his reputation that he studies, works hard, and makes good grades, or is it a bad thing?
Jay: It's really a good thing 'cause he tryin' to do somethin'; he got, he tryin' to finish school prob'ly, studying, trying, trying to do somethin' with himself.
R: So do other guys look upon him in a good way, or is he likely to get teased?

Jay: Most likely to get teased, for the time being. But, then, at the same time, they gonna be like 'that's what's up; at least he's doin'something'.
R: O.K. So he has to then put up with the teasing in school, and then later he'll be respected—is that what you're saying?
Jay: Yeah.
R: Did you, do you think that most guys can put up with that in school to where they actually study, or do they get to where they, the peer pressure is so much that they just give it up because they want to please their friends? What do you see?
Jay: I think, like, if you really tryin' to do it, no word gonna stop you, no word, no action, no one else is gonna stop you from doin' it. But, like, if you really not focused on, payin' attention, doin' your work, then it's gonna get you down, you know.
R: O.K. Do you have any last opinions or thoughts to give me on my whole process with African American males and schooling?
Jay: I really think it's like, it's really good that you're interviewing, findin' out what people think like this 'cause most people, they don't know what's, what be goin' on in people's heads. Like, they got crazy people nowadays that goin' out there, just runnin' in schools, killin' children for no reason (refers to recent Sandy Hook tragedy). So it's like, like, you get word out about people, what they think about school so that could prob'ly change other people's opinions, too, so…
R: And what do you think that people need to know about African American boys?
Jay: That we just like other people, you know. There ain't nothin' different except for the skin color, and that's it.
R: O.K. Thank you so much for your time and your thoughts.

Interview: John
Location: Upstairs hallway, outside of classroom
Date: 12/18/12

R: O.K. How would you describe your experiences with school? Like, when you think about your experiences that you've had from elementary school up until now, how would you say, what would you say about your experiences with school?
John: School, like, back then or, like, just now?
R: Overall.
John: Uh, I know that you need school. I know that. Like, you need to go to school, but… through school, when I was young, I used to get picked on, but now it made me into, like, a stronger person. So now I ain't worried about it anymore. And I used to bully people but not no more.
R: You used to bully people?
John: Not no more.
R: So when you got picked on, what was it, like was there something that they were particularly picking on you for?
John: I was, I was a few feet smaller than everybody.
R: Oh, you were smaller than everybody.
John: Yeah

R: O.K. Now did you live in Thibodaux your whole life or…
John: Nah, I lived in Houma.
R: You lived in, oh, you live in Houma now?
John: Nah, I live in Thibodaux now; I used to live in Houma.
R: You used to live in Houma. O.K. So what are some of the schools you went to?
John: Uh, Southdown Elementary…
R: O.K.
John: And then I came over here to Chackbay Elementary; then I went to Sixth Ward Middle School; then I came here.
R: O.K. So you've hopped a bunch.
John: Yeah.
R: O.K. What classes are your favorite classes, would you say, and why?
John: This year?
R: Overall.
John: All right. Not math class; I don't like math. (laughs)
R: (laughs) Why don't you like math?
John: I ain't good at it. I ain't good in math.
R: So, then, which ones are your favorites?
John: I usually like science class.
R: O.K. Is there something in particular about science that…
John: No, it's just easy.
R: (laughs) What science class do you have this year?
John: That class down the hall over there.
R: O.K. All right. Is there something about that teacher that, um, that you connect with or that you like?
John: She fun; she a fun teacher.
R: O.K. O.K. Um, so, do you feel, then—this is my next question—that you connect better with certain teachers?
John: (pause) Yeah. Certain teachers, like, they willing to work with you more than other teachers. Like, other teachers, you know, you could tell they don't really care about you, and some teachers do.
R: Like, they're just here to collect their paycheck kind of thing?
John: Yeah.
R: Um, do any of them do something that makes class interesting for you?
John: No, not really. You could just tell what they here for. Like, certain teachers, you could just tell they here to help you. Some teachers, it's like, don't even care.
R: O.K. Tell me about some of those teachers with regard to you specifically, that you can just tell they don't care.
John: They got a bunch of 'em here; I don't wanna say no names…
R: Oh, no, I don't want you to say names. No, but, like, how do you, what are some of the things specifically that they might do that show you that they don't care?
John: Like, you ask them for help, they gonna act like, they gonna act like it's a bother or something, like they don't really wanna help you. They just, like, they pity you or something.
R: They pity you?
John: Yeah. It's like, you ask for help, like, some teachers, they don't really care to help you. And some other teachers, they'll help, like, they'll offer you help and stuff.

R: O.K. Have you ever had a teacher that has gone the extra mile to help you, that you remember?
John: (pause) Nah, I never really, I don't think I really needed it, but, like, I'm pretty sure some of 'em would.
R: O.K. Good. Um, what are your relationships like with your teachers and administrators?
John: Um, they, they all right.
R: O.K. Administrators? Are you pretty much out of the office? Do you ever have any dealings with the office or…
John: Some times. Like, like, once or twice a year.
R: O.K. In your experiences with that whole administrative process, with the write-ups and everything else, have you found that it's a fair thing? Did you deserve what they gave you? Did you feel like you were singled out? What would, how would you…
John: They write you up for stupid stuff…
R: They write you up for stupid stuff?
John: Yeah.
R: O.K. Talk about that for a second.
John: Like, the other day, I had cursed in class. They gave me two days after school for no, that's stupid.
R: O.K. So do you know of other students, then, who might do the same thing…
John: Yeah.
R: …who might get away with it?
John: They get away with it. Me, I get a write-up…
R: O.K. Why do you think that is?
John: (pause) I don't know.
R: O.K. Is it, is it a racial thing? Is it a boy-girl thing? Is it just a you thing? Like, what is, what is your opinion? There's no right or wrong answer.
John: I think, based on, like, how good they do in the class. Like, if their grades are good, like real good, then they gonna get better treatment than everybody else.
R: Interesting. Good. What kinds of activities do you like to do in your classes? Like, do you like group work; do you like where the teacher just teaches, and the class listens; do you like projects; do you like writing assignments? What kinds of things do you like to do?
John: I rather do, like, projects and group work.
R: Projects and group work. O.K. Because some kids feel awkward or feel uncomfortable working in groups, but you like to work in groups.
John: As long as I know the person.
R: (laughing) As long as you know the person. O.K. Um, what about writing? Do you like to write?
John: (pause) Nah, I don't like to write.
R: You don't? Do you do any writing at home, then? At all?
John: Nah.
R: Not for fun? Not in journals? Not raps, not poetry—nothing?
John: Nothin'.
R: O.K. Um, what about in school? If you had to have an assignment in school that involves writing, what might that, what might you like to do at school that involves writing?
John: Like, what topic?
R: Yeah, like, what kinds of assignments?

John: Sports or, like, about my life or something.
R: Sports or about your life. O.K. Um, do you like to read?
John: (pause) Not really, but…
R: (laughs)
John: It don't really interest me.
R: O.K. That leads to my next question then. Do you like to read at home? Do you ever read outside of school?
John: No.
R: No? O.K. In school, has there ever been anything that you've read that has really interested you, that you remember?
John: The Outsiders, the book The Outsiders from, like, sixth grade, seventh grade, eighth grade—it was one of them years.
R: What did you like about The Outsiders?
John: It was, like, it was just a cool book. Like, it was a story about these two gangs and all; it was just a cool book and, like, you could kind of relate to it 'cause it's like, you live, like, you live in the hood and stuff, there's a lot of violence, you know, and, like, you could, I could relate to it.
R: O.K. You say this is a book about the hood, and you say that you can relate to it. Do you consider yourself as living in the hood?
John: Not no more; I moved with my grandma and them.
R: O.K. You used to live in the hood.
John: Yeah.
R: O.K. Tell me about that.
John: It's a, it's a, I don't wanna say it's a bad experience, but it's, it's all right. It's, like, it's good sometimes; sometimes it's not good. It depends. Like, it'll make you into a stronger person, like harden you up and all, but other than that, too much stuff, like stupid stuff, like people be shootin' for no reason. Other than that, it's, it's all good.
R: Were you scared when you lived there?
John: Um, not really. Like, at first, you gonna, you gonna live scared, you get used of it.
R: O.K. Do you think it's a good thing that people get hardened up, or is this an experience that nobody should have to go through?
John: Uhh (long pause)…I don't really know. It depends on you.
R: O.K. Interesting. Um, what is your greatest accomplishment that you've had while you've been in school?
John: Football.
R: Football? O.K. Do you, um, do you still play football?
John: Yeah.
R: Talk about sports with regard to you. What is, what role do sports have in your life?
John: Like, it's a big role. Like, it'll help take your mind off of things. Like, I, I really, I like sports, like really wanna play sports when I grow up. I go home, do all kinds of stuff. Really want to play sports.
R: So when you go home, do you spend a lot of time playing sports? Like, do you play basketball where you are…
John: Yeah.
R: O.K. Um, what do you think of students who study hard and make good grades?
John: There's nothin' wrong with that.

R: O.K. Do they, do they get picked on, or are they looked up to, or how do you see them?
John: It depends on, like, how their personality is, to me. Like, I don't, it don't really bother me. Like, I don't care. It's, like, you study hard, that's good, that's a good thing. But, like, it depend how you act. Like, you brag about it, like you smart and all, I ain't really gonna talk to you, but…
R: (laughs) O.K. So as far as reputation, if you're known around this school as studying hard and making good grades, like, you personally, for instance—would that be a good thing for you or would that be something that you'd kind of like to keep under wraps, like…
John: Uhh, a good thing…nah, I don't know. To tell you the truth, I don't know.
R: In terms of, like, your reputation, would that be a good thing for your reputation for you to be known as somebody who studies hard and…
John: Yeah, 'cause then everybody wanna cheat off (laughs), everybody wanna cheat off you.
R: (laughs) Do the ladies like somebody who studies hard and makes good grades?
John: Yeah.
R: Yeah? O.K. What kinds of kids do you think seem to do well in school?
John: The kind that study.
R: The kind that study? Is it across the board, just fair, like, if you study, you make good grades, or are there some things that work underneath that surface?
John: It depend on the teacher.
R: It depends on the teacher. So, you think some teachers have favorites.
John: Yeah. I know some teachers, like, they used to give people grades. Like, when my sister and all came to school, like, they used to give them grades and stuff. I don't know if they still do.
R: O.K. What makes you who you are? What makes you unique?
John: Me, like, just who I came from and, like, my brother and all—my brother's death, that really, like, it affects me, but it makes me strive harder for what I want.
R: One last thing about African American men—what does it mean to be an African American man?
John: Really, like, just take care of your family, put God first, and, like, just try to, try to be a better man.
Tape ran out at this point. Notes taken by researcher on content of missed section: Involved John telling researcher about his older brother, who always wanted to be a "gangsta." When they lived in Houma prior to John's moving with his grandma to this area, John witnessed his brother getting shot and killed. From that point, his brother's death has served as a motivator for him to make more of himself and a reminder of what he does not want to be (gangsta). He has a tattoo on his arm in memory of his brother, and his brother is often the topic of his writing assignments in his classes.
Interview continues:
R: What about African American males at this school?
John: African American males in this school—people assume things. They see them walking around together and assume they gangstas, just because they walking together in a group or somethin'.
R: O.K. Is an African American man uniquely different from men of other ethnicities?
John: Uhh (pause)…
R: And this is just your honest answer, like…
John: I really don't know.

R: You don't know? O.K. You don't think that, like, a white man or an Asian man—is there, like, a certain type of man that is the ultimate man for white men, an ultimate man for black men, or a, like, some kind of man that everybody strives to be like?
John: Nah.
R: O.K. In your eyes, what kind of man do most African American men, like, who is a person that most African American men might strive to be more like?
John: Uhh (long pause)…I'm tryin' to think of somebody.
R: Like, any role models that you might have…
John: Like, I like Adrian Peterson. He plays football, plays football. Like, his brother died, made him stronger and…
R: So, that motivates you.
John: Yeah, it motivates me.
R: O.K. Who is that person again?
John: Adrian Peterson.
R: Oh, O.K. Adrian Peterson. O.K. Gotcha. O.K. Um, that concludes our interview for now. Thank you for your time.

Interview: Al
Date: 12/18/12
Location: Hallway outside classroom

R: O.K. Tell me about your relationships with your teachers.
Al: I really like my teachers. I think it, I think I connect a lot with my teachers. Uh, we all get along.
R: O.K. Administration the same way?
Al: Yeah. I don't think I talk to any of the administrators.
R: So, then, I take it you haven't been in the office very much.
Al: No. Not a lot. Does checking in count?
R: (laughs)
Al: 'Cause I checked in a lot.
R: (laughs) Yeah, yeah. That's fine. No, I was talking about discipline-wise.
Al: Oh, one time—for a pullover (refers to an "illegal" pullover sweatshirt he wore) like this.
R: Oh! One time—for an "illegal" pullover?
Al: Yeah.
R: O.K. Um, what about writing and reading? Do you like to write and read?
Al: (pause) I don't like to write and read. Uh, reading makes my eyes heavy and makes me want to go to sleep sometimes, and, uh, writing, I have this bruise on my finger that, it hurts if I write too much. So writing and reading—I don't like to do none of that.
R: O.K. So then this leads to our next question: Do you read or write outside of school?
Al: No.
R: Never.
Al: Never.
R: O.K. Like, you don't read articles on the internet or read magazines or read books.
Al: Uh, does, like, skipping through words count?
R: (laughs)

Al: ‘Cause I look at, go on ESPN sometimes, and I skip through words.
R: O.K. So you kind of skim the articles, like sports articles.
Al: Yeah.
R: O.K. If you read or write in school, what kinds of things do you like to read about or write about in school?
Al: Uh, in school, I like to…either read about, like, mystery-type of books or non, I mean fiction books, like Percy Jackson (?) and all that type of stuff. I don’t like to read real stuff. I like to read about fake things and, uh, I like to write about some type of sports articles, something that I really enjoy, instead of writing about anything that’s not getting to know about.
R: Have you liked this book Monster we’ve done in this class?
Al: Yes. I really like this book.
R: Why?
Al: ‘Cause it’s some sort of, like, I don’t know, you get connected to real life, instead of just a book that somebody just wrote. You get connected to real life.
R: O.K. That novel with the real-life events—do those real-life events pertain to your real-life events?
Al: No. Not really. I can’t compare myself to that book.
R: O.K. Explain. Why, how are you not like, or how is your situation or your life not like that book?
Al: Um, the way I was raised. Um, my mom taught me to always be a leader and not a follower and make, and choose the right path and to make friends that you know that’s not going to get you in trouble. So, the way I was raised, you have to, you know, stay away from a bad group and find someone that you know is going to relate yourself to you. So, that’s the way I was raised.
R: O.K. Now, do you currently live with both Mom and Dad or just Mom or…
Al: Both.
R: O.K. Do you have any sisters or brothers.
Al: Yes, ma’am.
R: O.K. How many siblings do you have?
Al: I have four. I have two brothers and two sisters, and I count my nephew as one of my brothers.
R: O.K. Do you guys live, how would you characterize your community or your neighborhood? Like, do you live in Thibodaux, what section of Thibodaux do you live in…
Al: Uh, it’s pretty hard to explain ‘cause where we live at, the front of the street is Terrebonne parish, and the back is Lafourche parish.
R: So, is it out there by Schriever?
Al: Uh, it’s right there, yeah, you can say that.
R: O.K. O.K. Um, how would you characterize your neighborhood?
Al: Very quiet. Uh, everybody back there is very nice; they’re, they work a lot, so none of them be at home; I have no kids where we stay at, so it’s very quiet.
R: O.K. So would you say it’s safe, too?
Al: Oh, yeah.
R: Safe and quiet.
Al: Yeah.
R: O.K. Is it the kind of place that you would want to raise your own kids in?

Al: Uh (pause)…not really. But the quiet part, yes. But, like, if my kids wanted to play, I would like to have some other kids for them to play and socialize with instead of having to play by themselves all the time.
R: O.K. Do you remember, and this is kind of going back to books, if you were read to as a child?
Al: Yes. My mom read to me, very often, 'cause I think it was, like, the second, I mean the fourth grade, I had to take all kinds of tests because they wanted to skip me up a grade. So my mom made me read a lot to keep my vocabulary up and everything. I think her reading to me really helped me out.
R:Was it successful? Did they skip you up a grade?
Al: No. I think I had started acting up a little bit.
R: And this was around fourth grade, you said?
Al: Yes, ma'am.
R: O.K. Now, now, what do your parents both do?
Al: Uh, what do you mean by that?
R: Like, for their jobs, like, for their careers.
Al: Oh, my dad, he works offshore and my mom, she's a stay-at-home mom.
R: O.K. Alright. Good. Um, what about school, um, as far as, like, students that, that study hard, that make good grades. What about their reputations among other students? Is it a good thing that they study hard and make good grades, or do they get teased for studying and making good grades, or what are your experiences?
Al: My experiences with kids like that, it don't really bother me, just because they study a lot; it's just, they're making the right choices. So it doesn't really bother me a lot. But sometimes I see other people make fun of them 'cause they make good grades and all that. But I don't really go along with that 'cause I think that's really cool of them to make good grades and really wanna go somewhere in life.
R: Because the rewards come later, right?
Al: Right.
R: Um, O.K. Talk about yourself really briefly, about growing up—anything—memories you have or anything that is unique about your family or your, your life growing up.
Al: Um, when I was younger, I was an animal freak; I used to love animals. But ever since I grew up, I started to dislike animals, and my worst animal that I hate the most is frogs.
R: (laughs)
Al: I have no idea why, but I really hate frogs.
R: You don't have any particular experience with frogs that makes you not like them?
Al: No. I think I watched too much Animal Planet, uh, how they, you know, some of 'em are poisonous and everything, and I really disliked them ever since then. But my dad, he loves animals; my little brother, he hates animals.
R: So do y'all have any pets in your house?
Al: I have a little dog, and outside, a stray cat. And we have, like, fifteen stray cats.
R: (laughs) You almost have a farm.
Al: Yeah. Pretty much.
R: O.K. So what are your hopes and dreams for the future—this is kind of, like, on a different note, but….
Al: Um, when I get older, I'd like to play pro football, but besides that, I'd like to be an x-ray technician and, uh, like, I'll help, like, I'd like to help my mom and dad out a little bit more and,

uh, just give back to the people that helped me. So, yeah, stuff like that. I don't want to be selfish with the money that I have; I just like to help other people.
R: Interesting. Um, what do you think is the most important thing in your life—if you had to pick something, if I were to ask you that general question.
Al: Um, the most important thing to me is my religion. I really base my life around that 'cause without God, you really can't do anything. That's the way I was taught. And, uh, I really treasure that. So, like, when I'm about to play football, I always pray for Him to help me, so…when bad things happen, I'll still be happy and confident in myself so I don't have to worry about it. 'Cause I know that God is always watching me, so I really don't have to worry about anything.
R: So religion and God have played a big part in your life from, from when you were young, then.
Al: Yeah.
R: O.K. Um, do you and your family attend church regularly, together, do y'all…
Al: Not really, but we would like to start going back 'cause we've been off a little bit. We haven't been, you know, together a lot 'cause my sister's working every day; Dad's working every day, so we really can't find the right time for that, to go.
R: O.K. And this is something y'all would like to do.
Al: Yeah.
R: O.K. Um, one last thing—What do you want me to know about African American men. I'm doing this whole project; I'm asking y'all your thoughts on things. Is there anything that you would like for me, or anyone who reads my work, to know about African American men?
Al: Um, I think African American men can be more successful than what they are right now if they really put their head to it. 'Cause sometimes the people that I be around, they're really intelligent, but they do some crazy things that'll mess up their lives. And I'd like to tell 'em something, but sometimes you really can't tell anybody anything. So, I think if African American men really put their heads to it, it would be, that would be cool. They'd get higher in society.
R: So you think that there's some potential there, but that people don't use their potential.
Al: Yes.
R: O.K. Alright.
Al: Like, in sports, like, you can be a great athlete, but then when they get in the classroom, they wanna act up, you know, not do their work. And that drives me 'cause you're a really good football player, but if you act like you have no type of common sense, then that really gets me. So, I would like to tell 'em that you just gotta really put your head to it and just, just keep going, get your life right.
R: O.K. Thank you very much. I really appreciate your time and your answers.

Interview: Dee
Date: 12/19/12
Location: Upstairs hallway outside classroom

R: O.K. Um, how would you describe your experiences with school? Like, if you had to talk about, you know, overall—from elementary, middle, to now—how would you describe your experiences with school?
Dee: So you can learn more things as you go.

R: O.K. That's what school is for for you. But what have your experiences been like? Have they been good, have they been not so good, have you had some good and bad times? Tell me about it.
Dee: Good and bad times.
R: O.K. Um, those bad times that you're talking about, tell me a little bit about that.
Dee: There's some things I been dealing with since kindergarten, like losing friends for stupid stuff.
R: O.K. When you say 'losing them for stupid things,' did they pass away, or did you guys just not, you're not friends anymore, did they move away? Like, what exactly happened?
Dee: Not friends anymore 'cause of arguments.
R: O.K. So those friendships, you no longer have at this time.
Dee: Some of 'em I do; most of 'em I do. It's just, like, a couple of 'em.
R: O.K. As far as classes here now, which classes would you say are your favorites and why?
Dee: I would say (pause)…what do you mean? Like, subjects or…
R: Well, you don't have to do teacher's names but perhaps subjects.
Dee: I would say (long pause) maybe, like, social studies class, civics class. You know, learn more about the past, do more projects. I don't like class where all we do is read and not do class activities together.
R: What is it about projects that you like, when you work on projects in class?
Dee: 'Cause I like to draw. I like when we got projects, and we gotta draw something, I be the drawing person for the rest of the group.
R: O.K. You like to draw. Is drawing something you do at home when you're not at school? Do you do it for fun?
Dee: Yeah. Like, when I'm at home, I like to draw a lot; it just, like, helps with whatever I'm going through; I'll just go sit at the table and just draw whatever is on my mind.
R: O.K. Can you tell me some of the things you might draw?
Dee: Some things, sometimes I'll draw some roses, a heart, different symbols.
R: O.K. And when you say 'different symbols,' are they symbols that mean something to you in your life?
Dee: (long pause) Yeah. Something happened. Like, one day, I had drew the drama faces, and my momma had asked me why I drew that, and I never told her why.
R: The drama faces? Like, the little masks that you would see, like, at a Mardi Gras, like on a Mardi Gras thing?
Dee: Yeah.
R: O.K. Can you tell me why? What does that mean to you?
Dee: Like, everybody could be happy at times and be sad at times. If you happy, just, like, when you sad, just make sure, like, just try to cheer yourself up; if you happy, just try to always be happy. Just make sure you stay happy instead of being sad. And make sure you do things that you want to do instead of friends convincing you to do things that you don't want to do 'cause that'll make you sad.
R: That is very, very powerful. I really like that. Wow! That's awesome! Have, have you been in a situation before in your life, where friends have made you do something that you regretted or that made you sad, that you could go back and fix? Did, has that ever happened to you?
Dee: Yes.
R: O.K. Do you care to elaborate at all?
Dee: Huh?

R: Do you care to tell any more about that?
Dee: Well, like, one day we were walking down, yeah, we was walking down the street; I think it was, like, the last Thursday of Mardi Gras break. And we had exploded some fireworks, and we were, they were popping them, and the police came. And then they told me to throw it at the police car, and then I did it, and then I regretted it, had community service for, like, four days.
R: Wow.
Dee: And I regret doing that.
R: Do you remember about how old you were?
Dee: I think I was about fourteen.
R: O.K. O.K. Wow. That's interesting, very interesting. Um, let me ask you another question. What are your relationships like with your teachers here? Are there some that you can better connect with than others or…
Dee: Yeah. With most of 'em…well, the classes I have now are, like, we can, we like a community. Like, if I have a problem, I can go to them and talk about it. But last year, I didn't really feel comfortable talking to 'em 'cause I was new here and just gettin' to know, like, what all they had and how the teachers go. But now since I, like, know most of the teachers, I can, like, go ahead and talk to 'em, and they help me.
R: Are they, do you find that they're pretty helpful and willing to help you whenever you need something in their class?
Dee: Yeah.
R: O.K. Um, what about you with the front office? Have you had dealings with administration as far as, like, um, write-ups and referrals and things like that since you've been here?
Dee: Last year, I used to, like, cut up because they had, like, a bunch of, like, a bunch of my friends in there, and we used to, like, talk all day, and we used to get written up, like, together. It wouldn't be just, like, one here or nothin'. It was, like, both of us go together, and I had a bunch of write-ups. But this year, I only got one, and I'm tryin' to, like, not get in as much trouble.
R: Good. Let me ask you something else. Do you find that African American boys are written up about the same as white boys or white people or are they, do you feel, that they are singled out at all?
Dee: Well, it depends because, like, the African American boys, I feel like they choose to act that way or just because, you know, they like to show off or whatever. Most of 'em like to show off and try to be all big and bad, try to get famous. To me, it like, it really doesn't matter. If you got fame, like on the music I listen to, like the rapper, he talk about, you can be famous, but you also gotta get money so you can have places to live, like try to get rich. They was like, uh, they was like 'Oh, I wanna get famous." I was like "Well, you can get famous; I'm gonna get me a job." You can be famous and still be a bum on the streets. And I was like "Bro, y'all gotta change y'all ways."
R: Now, this 'getting famous' idea, you said that's from a rapper. What rapper is this? Do you know?
Dee: Yeah. Meek Meel (?)
R: What's his name?
Dee: Meek Meel.
R: Meek Meel? O.K. Interesting. I'll have to look that one up. Now, this 'getting famous,' does it matter where you get your money from at all? Is it just getting famous, period? Or is it quick, easy money? Or is it having a real job where you get legitimate money? Or does it matter? Do you know anything about that?

Dee: You talkin' about what the rapper was talkin'about?
R: Well, how you and your friends see or how, how…
Dee: Oh, like, like popularity, like trying to get popular.
R: Does it matter how? Does it matter how? Or does it have to be the right way? Or…
Dee: Nah, it doesn't matter, as long as you get yourself known.
R: So it could be something like drugs or killing someone.
Dee: Yeah.
R: It could be a good famous or a bad famous?
Dee: Yeah.
R: O.K. Now talk to me for a second regarding that. How important is it for you guys to be, um, popular with your friends or to do things that your friends approve of?
Dee: Well, to me, it's not really that, it's not really that important. But they'll talk about, like, tryin' to get known around the school or tryin' to do somethin', like, to get talked about. And that's how they get known, I guess. Basically, I just kinda stay to myself, talk to my family members 'cause I got a good bit of family members that come here.
R: O.K. Now this whole 'getting known' thing—how do academics and studying figure into that? In other words, if a boy tries hard and studies and makes good grades, is that seen as something good with, with friends typically, or do people make fun of those kinds of people, or…how does that work?
Dee: I don't know. Like, if one of my friends, like, see me tryin' and stuff, they'll help me and, like, help me with it, like, make sure I do it right or, like…for example, if I'm doin' my work, but I know the class work, they'll come to me and, like, try to help me with it, and then I'll help and all of that. And, then, once they see, like, we doin' it, they all gonna come and try to do the same thing, too.
R: O.K. So, then, do you consider yourself a leader, among some of your friends, where they're going to try to do like you do?
Dee: Yeah. It's like, we look up to each other for certain things, not all things, but…like, when I, we go play basketball, and on the basketball court, like, like, somethin' we don't know how to do, we'll, like, if there's one of us know how to do, we teach each other how to do it, so we can get better at it and practice at it. Or if we got, like, English homework—like, say we had homework for Ms. Simmons, and we didn't know how to do it, we go to each other house and help each other and get it right.
R: O.K. And let me ask you a question about that, too. What about homework and studying? When you leave here in the afternoon, is there, do you do homework and studying at your house or are you like some kids who, you don't take books home, and you don't do homework at your house, or how does that work for you?
Dee: Like, I go home and then, like, I'll lay around, and then, like, I'll go do my work, do my homework that night. And then, like, if I got, I know I got a test, I'll start, like, three days before and, like, read over whatever I got a test for like, for like ten minutes, fifteen minutes. And then I'll read it before I go to sleep, so I'll wake up in the morning and remember it. Then I read over it again in the morning, and I'll keep doing that every day until the test. Like, the other days, I usually don't, like, like, study hard, or if I really know it, I really don't study that much, like that.
R: Is this whole study habit thing that you have going on here, is it something that you want to do, or is it something that your parents have, um, encouraged you to do? Do you have family support where your family expects you to do well in school because I see a lot of kids for whom

studying doesn't matter, and there's really nobody at home that cares. Is this important due to your family?
Dee: Yeah. 'Cause, like, my mom make sure I do my homework, like, all the time. Like, as soon as I get home, and she sees me just, like, sitting down, she'll be like 'You got homework? Go do it. And make sure you show me it before you pick it up.'
R: (laughs) So do you live with just Mom? Is it Mom and Dad? Is it, what are your living arrangements like?
Dee: Just Mom and Dad. I mean, Mom; my Dad passed away.
R: I'm very sorry to hear that. How old were you?
Dee: When I was nine.
R: Do you remember what he passed away from?
Dee: Uh, heart problems.
R: O.K. I'm very sorry to hear that. Um, you guys live in Thibodaux?
Dee: Yeah.
R: O.K. What neighborhood or what area of town?
Dee: Over there, like, where that hospital is.
R: O.K. Like, kind of by Nicholls?
Dee: Yeah. Around that area. By the, I would say by the church over there, by Moses church.
R: Oh, O.K. Like, on Canal Boulevard.
Dee: Yeah. Around there.
R: O.K. Well, how would you describe your neighborhood? Is it quiet? Is it noisy? Is it safe? Is it violent? Is it scary? How would you talk about your neighborhood?
Dee: It's like, some, it's not really, well, for the little kids, I would say it's not safe 'cause, like, the cars are going fast down the road. But you don't never hear, like, no violence or no shootings 'cause everybody knows everybody in the neighborhood. And you don't, you'll see a police, like, come down there, like, I'd say, like, twice a month, but we don't hardly see police come down…
R: So everybody looks out for each other.
Dee: Yeah. We help each other out. Like, if somebody needs something, we'll help each other out.
R: O.K. Talk about church for a second. Is, is church and your faith and God a big part of your life and your family's life or not really?
Dee: Yeah. It's a big part. We, we, but we try to go to church every Sunday. Like, but my mom, she doesn't have a car, but my stepdad, when he don't have work, he works on a plant, and when he don't have work on Sunday, we'll go. And then on the days we can't make it, we'll just pray at home.
R: O.K. What do you get out of church? What is, what is church for you?
Dee: To learn more things about, like, for instance, like, when we went to church recently, I think it was last Sunday or Sunday before that, uh, the pastor was talkin' about, like, the day we supposed to die on, December 21st, and he was, like, saying, my mom said to pay attention 'cause that's what he was gonna talk about. And I was like, I was listening , and he was talking about, like, why would God make more, like, kids if he was, why would He have more kids come onto earth if the earth was gonna end? Don't you think they would have side effects letting us know the world was about to end? And then he said, "As a matter of fact, God wouldn't want us to be aware of when the world will end." And I always been thinkin' about that, and I was

like, ‘you right.’ And like, he was like, “Why would He want the people to know when the world was ending?” He don’t want nobody to prepare for it.
R: So that helps to make a lot of sense out of this whole hysteria that everybody’s going through right now.
Dee: That’s why when other people say, “Oh, the world gonna end,” I don’t pay no mind to it.
R: (laughing) O.K. Um, talk specifically about books and writing for you. Do you like to read in school and write in school, and do you do any of that at home? You’ve said you draw. What about books, reading books and writing?
Dee: Um, like, I read, I’ll read a book, like, if it’s interesting, at home, but at school, like, most of the time, the books, the books we read aren’t interesting.
R: Has there been a book recently that you’ve liked that you read at school?
Dee: Uh, when I was in, I’d say eighth grade, I liked the book The Outsiders, and I like the book Monster we read in here.
R: O.K. What do you like specifically about the book Monster that we just read?
Dee: I like, well, it’s basically, like, relates to some of the people. Like, if they got a crime going on, and you involved with it, and the police will pick you up and think you the bad guy or stuff like that. If you were, like, somebody of a different race, they probably wouldn’t say nothin’. ‘Cause, like, when we have, like, one day a while ago with my friends, well, my cousin, and he was with his friends, and he know, like, all these rules about what the police will do and all that because his dad was a police, and we were, when we got stopped or whatever, for Mardi Gras, they had a open container of beer, and he was like “I played the 21st amendment” and all that, and the police were like, “What he is talkin’ about?”And the police stayed their distance the next day, and they was talkin’. And when they seen us, they kept calm; they didn’t try to slam us or nothin’ like that. But if it really had never happened, they would have prob’ly tried to arrest us and everything.
R: So you think that as an African American male, that you have more difficulty with people assuming that because of your skin color, that you’re guilty.
Dee: Yeah. Like, like maybe if we, if we go, if we go into a store, like, normally an African American wouldn’t go in there, they prob’ly look at us funny or something like that.
R: Do you feel that way, um, here at school at all?
Dee: No.
R: O.K. So you don’t feel that there’s that assumption here at school?
Dee: Not, not for me. Prob’ly for other people.
R: O.K. Um, tell me about your hopes and dreams for the future. What do you want to do when you leave here?
Dee: Um, my first, my first goal is to play basketball one day; if that don’t work, my second goal is to, uh, draw; and if that don’t work, I’m planning on going to college for electronics and own my own electrical company or whatever.
R: O.K. What is sports for you? Or what do sports mean for African American boys? Why are they so into sports, do you think?
Dee: It relates to their family. Like, I learned from my older cousin who graduated from here and it’s somethin’ I guess the family members, gets passed on. You get good at sports from practicing. Like, when we have nothin’ to do, that’s all we do. Like, where I live at, well, we’ll just call each other; when everybody at home, we don’t have nothin’ to do, we’ll call each other up, ‘Oh, let’s go to the court.’ We all go in, don’t have no fights, and we, if somebody get mad at each other, we, like, calm ‘em down, make ‘em stop, and they’ll be cool after we go home.

R: So it's something to do when you guys don't have anything else to do.
Dee: Yeah.
R: O.K. One last thing—what is it, what would you like everybody to know, or me to know, about African American males? I'm doing this whole thing on African American males. What would you like people to know?
Dee: (pause) Like, don't judge 'em on how they look or how they act. They may be, like, difficult as a front.
R: O.K. And what is it, what does it mean to be an African American man? In your opinion, what is, what does that mean—an African American man?
Dee: (long pause) I really don't know. Well, like, I would say an African American man takes things seriously, takes care of things, like, when he needs to, and don't do bad things or whatever.
R: O.K. So somebody who's responsible.
Dee: Yeah.
R: O.K. That wraps everything up. I really appreciate it. Thank you so, so much.

Focus Group Interview
2nd period class
12/20/12
Location: Upstairs hallway outside classroom
Participants: John, BMore, Dee, Bob, Tate, Sosa

R: O.K. Talk about the novel Monster. Did you guys like the novel Monster? What did you get from the novel Monster? Tell me about it.
BMore: I liked it.
R: You liked it?
BMore: I liked being Steve.
R: You liked being Steve. Why did you like being Steve?
BMore: 'Cause he was a dog. I was, like, waitin' to see what was gonna happen.
Group: Yeah, yeah.
BMore: Like, the more I was readin' it, the more I was gettin' into it. Like, I was anxious to see what would happen next.
R: O.K. Some of you have said that you could relate to the novel.
Group: Yeah.
R: What was it that you could relate to?
Sosa: The trial, the part that he would go on trial for robbing somebody. And I'm about to go to trial prob'ly.
BMore: Him tryin' to identify who he is.
R: Him trying to identify who he is. O.K. Why does that speak to you, him trying to figure out who he is?
BMore: 'Cause a lot of people will tell you this, tell you that, but you don't believe 'em. You gotta do what you believe.
R: Wait. You're saying you know who you are?
BMore: Some people be that way.
Tate: We don't be in trouble. You can check it.

BMore: Yeah. Some people, they'll let the public think…
R: Well, who, talk about that for a second—they let the public say this and that. Are you talking about African American males specifically?
BMore: Everybody—even whites.
R: Everybody. O.K. What experiences have y'all had out with the public about what they say about African American males and things that you've had to deal with?
Tate: They stare…
Bob: Like, we just be walking, they don't have no reason…
BMore: The police, the police just pulled over and put us on the car.
R: O.K. Um, tell me what is most important to you guys as far as your identity. Like, who makes you who you are? Or what makes you who you are?
Nate: What you do.
BMore: Money.
Nate: Money, bro. I be packin' it.
R: Money makes you who you are?
Bob: Like, what happens in the past; it, like, shapes you up to who you are.
Dee: Things you do every day, every day.
Sosa: People try to tell you who you is, just because of where you at, you heard me? Things like, say, say, uh, I move to Marydale—Oh, man, he, he bad. Boy, he stay in Marydale. You don't know what I am! You don't know me, boy!
Group: (laughs)
R: So you're saying that people assume certain things because of where you live and how you look.
Group: Uh, huh!
Sosa: Especially if you live in Marydale!
Group: (laughs)
Nate: Yeah, that's always gonna happen to you.
Bob: Yeah, you ask a guy where he live, he say Marydale; they say "Oh, yeah…"
BMore: Judgin'!
Dee: Or, like, we, we all walkin' in a White neighborhood, they'll think we gonna steal somethin'.
BMore: Oh, yeah, look, he's walkin'; look what he's wearin'.
Group: (laughs)
R: O.K. So you're saying, you're saying the stuff that you wear, like, your outfit, your clothes. Like, is it name brands, or is it the certain way that you wear your clothes?
BMore: Both.
R: O.K. What about this "sagging" thing?
Sosa: Man, the police told me, man…
Group: (laughs)
Sosa: Look, me and my dog were walkin', they say we, uh, they say we robbed somebody. So we were walkin' down the street, and the police, they say, "The police lookin' for you." I said, "What they lookin' for me for?" So I went walk down there. They like, "Pull y'all pants up!" So, so I'm walkin'; man, my pants wasn't even down; my pants was on my waist. "Pull your pants up!" I'll pull 'em up, panties down, 'cause my pants was already up, you heard? And they gonna tell me, "Uh, get on the car!" And they put, they put my dog and his brother, they put them in the car, you heard me? They tried to talk to me. I'm like, "Man, I'm not about to talk to y'all for

somethin' I didn't do!" Police always…like, it's like my name on the beat, on the list, number one on the list (group laughs) If you see him, just doin'anything, stop him, it's mandatory!
R: O.K. I want to ask you, and thank you for your comments; that was good. Let's talk about sports for a second…
BMore: Oh, yeah!
R: A lot of you have mentioned sports as being a big part of your lives. What is sports to an African American male?
BMore: A way to get out, get out the hood.
R: A way to get out of the hood?
Tate: That's why everybody wanna play basketball.
Bob: I used to play sports in middle school and elementary school…
R: You used to play sports in middle school…
John: It seem like everybody that's black, play basketball.
Group: (laughs)
John: I mean, you don't see 'em playin'…
Tate: Soccer and golf…
Bob: Or baseball…
Group: (laughs)
Dee: I mean, you don't never see no black person playin' soccer…you never see 'em playin' baseball…
R: O.K. Why do you think that is?
BMore: 'Cause everybody that…
Dee: 'Cause people think that, like, baseball's a white person sport, and basketball's a black person sport, and football—I don't know—it's mixed.
BMore: I like football better than basketball, to tell you the truth.
R: O.K. So, so sports as a way to get out of the hood. Some of you also mentioned that sports is a way to stay out of trouble. Is that what it is to you?
Group: Yeah.
R: O.K. Is there a lot of downtime in your neighborhood, like, for you in your life?
BMore: Yeah.
R: A lot of downtime? Like, a lot of time without anything to do?
Dee: Yeah.
R: O.K. And so basketball kind of fills that up for you?
BMore: Yeah. See, see, if I ain't got nothin' to do, I prob'ly just go to the basketball court…
Dee: We were talkin' about that just now…
Nate: Everybody like "What y'all wanna do?"
Bob: It used to be, every time you walk around, you see somebody playin' football in the field…
Group: Yeah.
Bob: You don't see none of that no more.
Dee: Nope, not at all.
Bob: None of that.
BMore: We old now, man. Everybody wanna play basketball.
Dee: When we was young, we used to play football every day, used to play basketball everyday.
R: Well, what are they doing instead?
John: I don't know.
BMore: They prob'ly stopped playin' ball…

Dee: Disappearin'—everybody disappearin'.
R: They're disappearing? Where are they going?
Bob: Prob'ly gettin' in trouble and all.
R: Talk about, some of y'all talked about church, too—about faith and God in your lives…
Sosa: I went to church for the first time Sunday in two or three years.
Dee: You gotta have God and church in your life, like, for real.
BMore: God supposed to be in your life; God helps you.
John: You never know when your time over. After one of my friends, after one of my friends got killed last year, I stopped going to church, like…
R: So would y'all say that God and church are a big part of your identities? For some of you?
Group: Yeah.
John: After my brother got killed, I needed church 'cause that's when I started going. You never know when you gonna go (referring to a person's death); you never know when your time's over.
R: So is that a source for y'all of help, like, when you're having trouble or when you're down, that that helps you?
Group: Yeah.
R: Do your families encourage you to go? Do y'all go to church together?
BMore: Yeah. Sometimes I go to church without Mom or Dad.
John: Stopped going when my brother and all died…
Dee: Not me, I fell off of it, but…
Tate: I can't, man…
R: O.K. Let me ask y'all one last question. We've talked about sports; we've talked about church as being part of your identities. Is there anything else that I need to know or that other people who read my work need to know about what makes African American males who they are?
Bmore: Let's talk about the police.
Tate: Music.
Dee: African Americans don't listen to music…
John: They got songs that, like…
Sosa: They got music that tell stories, like what people been through.
Group: Yeah.
Bob: Music, you can, like, close your eyes and be like, "Yeah. I feel what they sayin'."
Dee: It move you, son.
BMore: Like, for real. Real life.
R: O.K. What kinds of artists are popular with you guys?
BMore: Lil' Wayne, Boosie, Webbit (?)
John: The rappers that, um, really lived some of the hard life
R: O.K. One last thing. What about you guys with school? I've talked individually with you about school and your experiences with school
BMore: Boy, let me tell you about school…
Dee: Man, I hate school, I don't mean to…
R: No, it's O.K. I appreciate your honesty. Go ahead and tell me.
Dee: Man, school hard; when I was, like, in middle school, I used to be happy. Like, I used to wake up, come to school. But, right now, I just don't wanna get up. If it was my choice to skip every day, I think I'd skip.
BMore: For me, it's my mom. Yeah, I gotta come.

John: The reason why I'm still in school 'cause before, before my brother died, he told me to stay in school. If it wasn't for that, I prob'ly would have been left.
Sosa: The reason why I'm still in school 'cause I don't wanna go to jail right now.
BMore: I see people finished school, finished school and are doing well…
R: So you're saying that for you, you see people who are finishing school now…
BMore:Yeah, they in college now…
R: …and you want to be like them.
BMore: And they strived not to stay in the hood…
R: So school's, like, a way to a better life; y'all see that.
BMore: Yeah, but school is, like, like…
Bob: Really, it is a way to a better life.
Dee: Teachers explain it so hard, the wrong way. In math, they say it's hard. But it can be really easy.
Bob: Man, he ain't lyin'!
John: Like, with one teacher, it be hard. And then another student will explain it easier to you so you can get it.
Dee: Man, they explain it the hard way, and they gotta get us to college…
BMore: As complicated as they could…
Dee: Then they show you another way. And you, like, "Well, why you didn't show this to us at first?" "Well, you gotta learn the hard way…"
Group: (laughs)
John: I hate that class; you (referring to teacher) know the easy way, you just don't want me to pass.
R: Does anybody want to give me any final thoughts for anything because this is, like, I mean, I, I will come back after the break (Christmas) and kind of talk with you guys some more. But are there, is there anything else that you want anybody to know?
BMore: Crack is whack.
R: No, really.
Sosa: People always be like "change"…
John: Don't judge nobody…
Dee: (addressing Sosa) Don't cut me off like that, man; I just told that man, don't cut her (researcher) off, and he's cuttin' me off like that.
R: O.K. Go ahead, Carlton, because we don't have much time.
Sosa: People always be like "Oh, you could change, you could do better, you could do better." You don't know what I, what I could do! And one more thing. People like, one of your people died, people like, "Oh, they in a better place." How you know that? Is you dead?!
Group: (laughs)
BMore: That nigga funny!
John: When you make bad grades, and you go home, and your momma looks…
Dee: …like they could do the work. Man, that stuff be hard!
Bob: Yeah, my momma act like she ain't never got a F. Fuck! On that progress report for 12th grade, she had three Fs. She, like, "You got a F." You (referring to his mom) got three on your progress report!
Tate: I never got three (Fs) on my progress report or report card. I only had one F, and then, I still don't get it!
Bob: Dumbest person in the world for tryin' to punish you for makin' an F.

R: O.K. Thank you guys for your time. This ends our focus group interview.

Focus Group Interview
3rd Period Class
Date: 12/ 20/12
Location: Upstairs hallway outside classroom
Participants: DJ, Vinny, Ray, Al, Jay

R: O.K. We've talked about African American male identity. Let's look at the novel that you guys just read. What did you think about the novel Monster?
Al: I think it was a good story.
Jay: Yeah, it was. It relates.
R: It relates how? It relates to you? How?
Jay: Many different ways, how he went to jail and accused of something he didn't do. Like, that happened.
R: You went to jail and were accused of something you didn't do?
Jay: Yeah.
R: Really? O.K.
Ray: And, like, where he come from, how he livin' life.
R: O.K. What does Monster, the book, have to do with your identity? Has it helped you to explore your identity at all?
Al: For me, not really.
R: It hasn't for you? It hasn't helped you to explore who you are at all?
Al: Nah.
R: O.K.
Jay: It makes you think about, like "What am, who am I?" Like, what am I tryin' to be?
R: O.K. Anybody else? Has Monster helped you explore who you are?
Group: Mmm…yeah.
R: The activities we've been doing with Monster?
Ray: Yeah, it helps you think about who you are.
(Interrupted by announcement)
R: Really quickly again, have the activities that we've been doing with Monster helped you at all to explore your identity?
Al: Oh, all the things we did? I thought you meant just reading the book.
R: Not just the book. So if the book did not help you explore your identity, what about the activities that we've done in connection to the book?
Al: Yeah. The activities did.
R: O.K. Explain that.
Al: Um, like, when, uh, when we had to fill in the circles and everything (refers to group brainstorming session on identity before reading), they prob'ly had a few things about me that I really never, really thought about and all that.
R: O.K. Can you give me some specific examples?
Al: Um, like, uh, I was very emotional. I didn't know that 'cause, uh, when I got hurt, I really cried a lot 'cause I got injured in sports and everything. I cried a lot. I was depressed for a very long time. And, uh, I explored that (in the pre-reading activities).

R: O.K. Would you recommend the novel Monster to other friends?
Vinny: Yeah.
DJ: Mmhmm.
Ray: Yeah.
Jay: It depends on if they take things seriously. Like, it depends on who the person is.
R: O.K. I want to touch on a couple of things that you guys have said over the last couple of weeks. What role do sports play in the lives of African American males?
Jay: I think, prob'ly a lot of 'em think, they just think sports might be the only way they can make it out.
Vinny: Make it out, yeah.
R: Make it out of what?
Jay: The ghetto, their situation.
Vinny: Their situation, yeah.
DJ: And a lot of people do it, you know, I guess, to try to keep, to keep out of trouble.
Jay: Yeah. They doin' it to keep out of trouble and…
Vinny: …find some positive role models.
Ray: To go to college, too.
R: O.K. Somebody said to go to college, too?
Ray: Go to college, yeah.
R: O.K. Any other final words on sports?
Al: Um, I think sports is not always to get out of the ghetto. Like I said, I think school is a bigger part of that.
Ray: Yeah, but I'm sayin'…
Al: You can be a monster in football, basketball, whatever. But if your grades are straight Fs across the board, you not going anywhere.
Jay: Sports really pushes you to do better.
Al: But some people just play sports to be with their friends and brag on what they do do. But, like, if you really wanna get somewhere, school is the main part of that. 'Cause sports is not going to carry you a long way. You gotta have that future.
R: O.K. Let's talk briefly. Some of you mentioned religion and church and God as part of your lives. What does church, or do church and God have some sort of impact on the lives of African American males?
Ray: Like, some people really do, like really do need to talk to God. And I think that when a lot of people turn their life around and, uh, you know, go to church and stuff, I think a lot of people actually change.
R: O.K. Do you all feel the same way? Do your families really emphasize church for you? Is that a big part of your lives or no?
Vinny: Yes, ma'am.
Ray: Yeah.
Al: Like, uh, my mom is always telling me if you see anybody that really needs help, like, you can't really help 'em. Like, the only way to get their life straight, first they gotta get straight with God. That's the number one. But you really gotta have the mentality of helping your own self 'cause you can't depend on everybody else, besides God. I mean, that's the way I look at it.
R: O.K. Any other comments on that part? (no answer) O.K. What about music? Because I've heard from a lot of people that music is a big factor or a big influence for you.

Vinny: Yeah. I think, like, what people hear a lot about the music, like, the drug life, the money, I think people just wanna be just like that. And I see a lot of young African Americans going toward that life.
Jay: And then they got a lot of 'em really tryin' to do it, tryin' to get out the position they in…
Ray: Yeah.
R: When you say "do it," do what?
Jay: Rap. Hurry up, get out, try to make somethin' of themselves.
Vinny: Yeah. They want the easy way out.
Jay: Yeah. They want to find the easy way out.
Vinny: Yeah. 'Cause a lot of rappers, I mean, like, a lot of rappers you look at, they rap a lot of things, like, they really don't let 'em. It's just, like, upliftin'. A few of 'em about school.
Jay: Like, music's somethin' like, really somethin' like, you know you not, like, good in school, going to work and stuff, you do somethin' opposite of that, like sports. You know you not good in school, you do sports. You know you not good in sports and school, you do music.
R: So you see music and sports as opposite of school?
Jay: Yeah.
R: Do y'all agree?
Al: I see sports and school together and music out of school, but it depends on what music you're talkin' about. Like rap and jazz, you could alternate, could be in the same category as school and sports (?).
Jay: Most of the black people either gonna rap or sing.
Al: We still got music in school; we have choir, band—all that.
Jay: Yeah.
R: So are y'all talking about rap music in terms of, because my last group said that rap music really spoke to them, that it, that it gave them, it had something to do with their lives.
Jay: Yeah. Because it's street talk, like, street, like, you gotta, you gotta really be understanding what they sayin'.
Vinny: Like, say, like, uh, say you got a rapper, and you know, like, he real, say he got the same thing that you go through, you can feel him more.
Jay: Yeah. It's powerful.
R: What are some of the artists that y'all listen to that really have to do with your life?
Ray: Boosie.
DJ: Tupac.
R: O.K.
Al: Like, sometimes I don't base it on my life; I just listen to it 'cause of the way it sounds and all that. But…
R: O.K. So, for you, it might not have to do too much with your situation or trying, you know, motivating you to…
Al: Well, motivational-wise, uh, for sports, I really do listen to music. That's my main motivation. But, like, to base my life around that…
Jay: It can, like, make your life better, get you to take the right path.
R: O.K. Let me ask y'all a few more questions. What do I need to know, and what do other people who read my work need to know about African American males?
Jay: They're people; they're like everybody else.
Group: (agree)
Ray: Just a different color.

Vinny: White people could play basketball?
Ray: Yeah.
Jay: Play football, too.
Ray: Yeah. That's for everybody.
R: O.K. Here at this school, do you find overall that African American males are treated that way, that they're just like everybody else, or are they treated somewhat differently?
Ray: Yeah. Kind of.
DJ: They got different parts; they got some racist parts, prejudice; they got Chackbay.
Jay: They got people that shouldn't be, but don't like black people at all.
DJ: Chackbay.
Ray: Certain people that like black people a little bit.
R: Are you talking about teachers, students, administrators?
Jay: Not most of the teachers.
Vinny: I see the teachers not prejudiced.
DJ: It's the students. Yeah. Like, some people from Chackbay.
Jay: I think people live with their parents; they put that in their minds.
Ray: Yeah. They put that in their minds, that black people do things…
Al: I think some teachers really hide what they feel towards us. 'Cause I think that's part of their job, to not show that favoritism.
Vinny: Yeah. They prob'ly don't show it; they prob'ly feel it.
R: So you feel that even if a teacher does try to treat you equally, that they might be just covering up some sort of feeling of…
Vinny: It's a certain type of way they do things
Al: I think, like, if you're honest…
DJ: Yeah, but they grown-ups; you know they mature.
Jay: I don't think it be like that 'cause all teachers treat everybody the same way. Some of the teachers even act black
Ray: Yeah. You ain't lyin'.
R: I want to go there for a second. What does it mean to act black? Like…
Jay: Like, they do, like, they'll be in class, and they'll clown. Like, when there's the right time to clown, they'll (students) be in there clownin' and the teacher, he'll come out of nowhere and start clownin' with 'em.
Vinny: Yeah. Listening to black music.
Ray: Black music. Mr. Haynes (teacher) does that.
Al: That's a prime example right there.
R: (laughs) Mr. Haynes. So I've heard some of you guys, or people in the past, tell their friends "you actin' white." What does that mean?
Al: Oh, I hear that a lot.
R: Oliver, you hear that a lot?
Al: Yeah. All the time.
Vinny: Look. This how I feel about actin' white and all that stuff. Like, sometimes, you know, African Americans, we normally, we really don't, you know, being ghetto…
Group: Yeah!
Vinny: …we have our, you know, we have our own little types of tone. So, you know, sometimes when they say the term of acting white, that mean, like, proper, over black. 'Cause I'm a, I'm gonna keep it 100% with ya', Ma'am…

R: That's what I want you to do…
Vinny: To me, white people talk better than black people.
Jay: Yeah.
Ray: Yeah. Better than black people…
Vinny: You got tone…
Jay: You got tone…
Ray: We say words that don't even make sense.
Group: (laughs)
Al: White people say the same thing we do…
Vinny: It's just a better type tone.
R: Ray, you wanted to say something?
Ray: Yeah. Like, some of your, some of your friends, like, they'll be all, like, "why you actin' white? You got your pants all the way up." They want you to act all like, sag and all that stuff.
DJ: Yeah. They'll be like, "I ain't talkin' to that man right there."
Al: I'll tell why I think people always say I'm acting white. I think it's mainly the way I dress and act.
Vinny: Yeah.
Al: I act crazy. But I dress normal. Like, I don't wanna wear all these fancy shoes…
Vinny: Yeah.
Al: …with these big chains around my neck.
Ray: That brings a lot of attention, too.
DJ: Yeah, for real.
R: So, that's what y'all think is acting black—those things that y'all were just talking about?
Vinny: Yes, ma'am.
R: O.K. How important are friends, like peer pressure? Like, do y'all feel a lot of pressure from your friends to either do well in school or not do well in school? Do they, do they, I mean, talk about that.
Al: The way I feel is when we get those tests back after we take 'em, and I see other people happy and made good grades and all that, and I got a big F on my paper…
Vinny: That make you feel bad.
Al: Yeah. That makes me feel bad.
Vinny: But you only could blame yourself.
Al: Yeah. My mom and I were talkin' about all my grades the other day. And she used my brother as a prime example. He's very smart, but he settled for Cs and all of that. My mom said, "Don't, don't go that way. You always want to be higher than just a C average." So I brought up the guy who's on the football team; his grade point average is a 2.5. And Mom said, "That's still not good enough. You don't wanna settle for that." So you always wanna get higher.
Vinny: That's awesome.
Jay: The good thing is that'll push you into college.
Vinny: …into college—LSU, Auburn…
Jay: Good friends will push you to be even better than what you are. Your work, like, say you are failing, struggling, they'll help you, show you how…
R: That's your good friends. But you also have some friends…
Jay: Bad friends…
Vinny: Yeah.
Jay: They tell you somethin'…

Ray: Try to make you look bad.
Al: Like you a retard.
Ray: I have more than one class with 'em.
Vinny: I had a friend like that (bad influence), but now, you know, growing up, I learned that, you know, I'm my own person; I make my own decisions. So, you know, I had to put an end to that.
R: Now, you guys, as far as education, and I've talked to some of you individually, but what are your dreams for when you leave (this school)? Like, is there a certain university you want to go to? Do you want to…
Vinny: I wanna be, uh, I wanna go to, if not, I'll settle for, like, Southern; I'll go to Southern; Southern prob'ly be my best option, but if not, I go to, uh, I wanna be, I wanna go into engineering, engineering or welding. So I prob'ly go to, like, ITT technical institution college; I was looking at a little college in Mississippi when I went down there, too.
Jay: I wanna go to either, like, Alabama, or, like, I'm really shootin' for the higher, highest colleges; but if I don't get into those, I'll settle for, like, LSU or Texas Tech or somethin' like that.
Vinny: I'll also go to music school 'cause I could rap.
Group: (laughs)
R: So what kind of jobs do African American males have, and are they what they want to have, or are they what they settle for?
Vinny: Welding.
Al: You know what I see a lot?
DJ: I see a lot of offshore.
Al: I see a lot of black guys working on the garbage trucks.
Vinny: Yeah.
R: O.K. So why aren't they doctors or lawyers?
Al: 'Cause they probably chose the wrong path…
Vinny: Chose the wrong road; the family they live in.
Jay: Dropped out of school.
Ray: Prob'ly don't have parents.
Al: Parents knocked up; the community they lived in; they probably lived in the street; they probably didn't have no type of support system.
Jay: Yeah. That's the prob'ly the biggest main influence—they prob'ly ain't had nobody in their life.
Ray: Yeah.
R: Does anybody want to add anything else? Any last things that I need to know or that anybody else needs to know?
Vinny: Uh, you wanna know why I think, another thing, African Americans be, like, say, like, if you look at, like, penitentiary and stuff—almost the whole prison population is African American.
R: Why do y'all think that is?
Vinny: I think we, I think sometimes we do stupid stuff.
Jay: We do things without thinking about…
Others: Without thinking about it. Yeah.
Vinny: We think about, we don't think about after the fact; we just think about that moment.
Jay: At that moment in time, like, you go ahead without your life…

Ray: You gotta think about it.
Jay: Numerous times, the police will say it over and over again, like, think, think before you do something.
Ray: And then people still don't listen.
Jay: So when it's that moment, and you gotta think before you do somethin', they do it before they think…
Vinny: And then it's after the fact when they get in trouble…
Jay: And then they think about it and say "Man, I'm dumb!"
R: Do you think that has anything to do with the fact that a lot of African American males fear for their lives and might think that they don't even have a future and so just choose to live in the present?
Group: Yeah. Yep.
Al: I think they just give up.
Jay: Yeah. If they see they can't reach that point, they just give up.
Vinny: Like, just right there, give up.
Jay: Like, right where they at.
R: Well, I thank you guys so much for your time. You have given me a lot to think about. Thank you.

Interview: Ray
12/19/12
Location: Hallway outside of classroom

R: How would you describe your experiences with school? Like, looking back from elementary school to middle school to now, if you had to talk about or tell about your experiences with school, tell me about them.
Ray: Like, what do you mean, like…
R: Were they good experiences? Were they good and bad, like what do you remember from school?
Ray: Well, good and bad. I was in trouble a lot, but ever since my dad died, I don't get in as much trouble.
R: O.K. So you're saying ever since your dad died, you don't get in as much trouble?
Ray: I used to.
R: What kinds of things were you getting in trouble for?
Ray: Like, talking a lot and crazy stuff.
R: O.K. Your dad passed away how long ago?
Ray: Two years ago.
R: Two years ago. I'm very sorry about that. Was it sudden? Like, did it happen without, was he ill for a while? Or did it happen all of a sudden?
Ray: He was ill for a while. Heart problems.
R: O.K. So you currently live with who?
Ray: My mom.
R: Your mom. Does anybody else live with you guys?
Ray: Yes, ma'am. My sister and my brother.
R: O.K. What, how would you describe your neighborhood? Like, you live in Thibodaux, right?
Ray: Yes, ma'am.

R: O.K. What part of Thibodaux do you live in?
Ray: Midland.
R: Midland? O.K. How would you describe your neighborhood?
Ray: It's a good neighborhood sometimes. It's not that bad, like, it's not a bad neighborhood.
R: O.K. Is there anything that you would change about it? Or would you raise a family there?
Ray: (pause) No, I don't think I'd raise a family there.
R: What about it is not good for raising a family?
Ray: Like, some things, like, some of the people they got over there. Like, the people they got around.
R: O.K. What about classes here at school? Are there some classes here at school—you don't need to mention teachers' names but just subjects—that are your favorites?
Ray: Well, I like, I like science.
R: What do you like about science?
Ray: I never used to like science 'til I started paying attention to it. And I like it.
R: So is it something about the way the class is done that you like, the class in particular, too, or just the subject?
Ray: I like the subject.
R: O.K. What about your least favorite subject?
Ray: Math.
R: Math? What don't you like about math?
Ray: I just don't get it.
R: O.K. Are there some teachers here at school that you feel that you connect better with?
Ray: Not really. I just do my work, you know.
R: Are they helpful to you? Do they help you when you need help?
Ray: Most of 'em.
R: Yeah? O.K. What kinds of activities do you like to do in your classes? Like, if you're in a class, what kinds of things do you like to do in a class?
Ray: I like working in groups.
R: What do you like about working in groups?
Ray: You can talk about something, work in partners on something…
R: O.K. What about reading and writing? Do you do any reading or writing outside of school?
Ray: No.
R: You don't read any magazines or write any poems or anything like that?
Ray: No.
R: O.K. What kinds of reading do you like to do in school?
Ray: Like (pause)…
R: Are there some books or some short stories or something that you've read that you like to read here at school?
Ray: Well, that book The Outsiders, I like to read here at school.
R: What did you like about The Outsiders?
Ray: I just liked, like, I just liked it. (long pause)
R: O.K. What about this book Monster that we just finished reading? Did you like it?
Ray: Yes, ma'am.
R: O.K. What did you like about Monster?

Ray: I just liked how, I liked how…(long pause) Like how they try to call the guy "monster," and they didn't know him, didn't know him until, like, after, and they put him in prison (long pause)…
R: O.K. So the fact that they call him a "monster," and they didn't really know him until later, does that relate to you in any way, or can you relate to that in any way?
Ray: No.
R: No? O.K. Have you ever had any difficulties or challenges in school? Things that you had to really work hard to get over or get through?
Ray: (pause) Not really.
R: O.K. What do you think about students who study hard and make good grades?
Ray: (pause) They're good students; that's what you should be doin' anyway.
R: That's what you should be doing. O.K. Do those kinds of kids get teased, though?
Ray: Sometimes, by people who don't do it (study hard).
R: O.K. Is there pressure within, say, African American male friendships, for some kids not to study because they might get teased if they study hard and do well in school or how does that work?
Ray: They might get teased by somebody, I think.
R: So, you're saying that they do get teased?
Ray: I guess…(long pause)
R: O.K. Is there pressure from friends not to do well in school? Or are friends supportive when they do do well in school?
Ray: (long pause) Shakes head "no."
R: No, they're not supportive when they do well in school? So, you're saying that a lot of kids get teased for doing well in school.
Ray: Yeah. If they're popular, other kids are going to follow 'em. And that's good, you know.
R: O.K. What motivates you to try hard in school?
Ray: Uh, the people around me, like, motivate me.
R: So people around you motivate you.
Ray: Yeah.
R: O.K. What does education mean for you and your future?
Ray: For your job and stuff. I mean, you can get a better job.
R: O.K. So what are your plans for when you leave here (high school)?
Ray: Go to work, get a job.
R: O.K. So you want to go straight to work when you leave here?
Ray: Yeah.
R: O.K. Do you have any idea what you want to do?
Ray: Uh, work offshore for a while; that's all.
R: O.K. What about, backing up a little bit to your home life—do you remember if you were read to as a child or not, like if your parents read books to you when you were little?
Ray: No.
R: O.K. The last thing I want to ask you is what would you like for me and anybody who reads my work to know about African American boys?
Ray: (long pause)
R: Are there some things that people don't know or that they don't listen to about African American boys that you would like to say?
Ray: No.

R: No? O.K. All right. Thank you very much for your time.

Interview: DJ
12/19/12
Location: Upstairs hallway outside classroom

R: Talk about your experiences with school. Looking back over elementary, middle school, and now, how would you say that your experiences, your time in school has been like?
DJ: I think that, uh, I've grown through education because in elementary school, I was struggling in math, and I wasn't too good in social studies, either. But after all that, I went to middle school, and it was more complicated, so I went to tutoring, and I finally got those things, and I have a tutor. I get 'em and everything, but I still struggle in math a little bit, especially geometry.
R: O.K. Have your struggles in school mostly been with your subjects or with friends and social things, too?
DJ: Social things, too, 'cause, like, playin' video games and tryin' to study and stuff, makes the grades a little difficult…
R: (laughs) I fully understand. Um, have you always lived here in Thibodaux, or did you move here from somewhere else?
DJ: I always lived in Thibodaux.
R: You always lived in Thibodaux. O.K. Do you live with Mom, Dad, both, one?
DJ: I live with both of 'em.
R: With both Mom and Dad? O.K. You live in Thibodaux?
DJ: Yeah.
R: O.K. What neighborhood or what area of town do you live in?
DJ: Not too far from school; I live in, like, Midland.
R: In Midland. O.K. All right. How would you describe your neighborhood?
DJ: It's all right. We have fights sometimes, but not bad fights; like, on church on Sunday (?), they have fights sometimes, not that bad, though. Everybody get along most of the time.
R: Is it a place where you would want to raise your children, raise your family?
DJ: (long pause) Mmmm…yeah, but if I ever have children, I would like to raise them, like, in a better place, though.
R: Better, meaning how better?
DJ: Better, like a friendlier neighborhood, like where you could grow up and learn from, learn to be nice to everybody, instead of being like…you know how they say, um, "being messy"?
R: Uh huh.
DJ: So they (children) don't have to learn all those type of things, and they could learn how to be nice, instead of using those slangs and stuff like that.
R: O.K. Here at school, what are some of your favorite classes—and you don't have to mention teachers, just subject areas?
DJ: I like English; I like family and consumer sciences; I like biology and power mechanics.
R: O.K. What do you like about English?
DJ: Just to express how you feel and all that stuff, and people will, like, read it and see how you feel.
R: O.K. And what about power mechanics? What do you like about that?
DJ: You get to work with your hands and do lots of fun stuff.

R: O.K. Is that something that you see yourself doing when you leave here? Like, what are your plans for when you leave here?
DJ: When I leave here, I plan on being a game designer.
R: A game designer?
DJ: I have to go to a college for that, a technical college 'cause that's what you need to be a game designer.
R: O.K. So you evidently, then, spend a lot of your time with video games.
DJ: Sometimes, sometimes not. At one time, I thought about being a social worker when I grow up.
R: What, what, um, attracts you to social work?
DJ: Making others happy and helping solve their problems so they don't have to be alone to do it.
R: In saying that, does that relate to any of your own experiences where you have felt at some point that you were alone or that you needed somebody's help and you wished that you had had that?
DJ: No. Because whenever I felt bad about something, I always had a parent or friend to help. I guess I got lucky.
R: I want to go on that family, friends, and getting lucky theme. Does church or God play a big role in you and your family's life?
DJ: Um, no. I only went to church one time.That was it. That was, like, a couple of years ago. That was my first time, well, not my first time. I just don't go to church often.
R: O.K. So you wouldn't say that religion or God has a big part in your family's life.
DJ: No.
R: O.K. What about sports? Do sports have a big part in your life?
DJ: It could 'cause I was playing baseball for a long time…
R: Here at school?
DJ: No. At the recreation center.
R: O.K. So at the recreation center. O.K. Um, do you feel that you connect better with some teachers than other teachers? And you don't have to mention names.
DJ: Yes.
R: O.K. What kinds of teachers do you connect better with?
DJ: (points to Ms.Simmons' classroom)
R: (laughs) And he's pointing to Ms. Simmons. What is it about Ms. Simmons, your English teacher, that you connect well with?
DJ: She's fun, and she understands us better than any other teacher could. She's young; she just came out of college, so she understands us better, and she look like the kind of person who's fun to be around; and I like my FACS teacher, too.
R: Is it a certain personality or a certain way they run the class? Or is it both?
DJ: Both. Where you could have fun and do your work at the same time without failing.
R: What activities do you like doing in some of your classes that you really enjoy?
DJ: Projects and getting to know other people.
R: What is it about projects that you like, as opposed to, like, sitting and taking notes?
DJ: It's fun, and you're doing work at the same time, instead of just doing straight work.
R: O.K. What about reading and writing for you? Do you read or write outside of school at all?
DJ: Sometimes. Sometimes but not all the time.
R: O.K. Let's start with reading. Do you read outside of school?

DJ: No.
R: No. O.K. What about writing? Do you write outside of school?
DJ: Yeah.
R: What kinds of writing?
DJ: Like, poems and stuff.
R: You write poems. O.K. Any particular subject that you write your poems about?
DJ: How the world is and how it's failing.
R: O.K. So how the world is and how it's failing. How do you feel the world is failing?
DJ: It's like, we in so much debt, and I heard on politicking news (?) that the economy's about to fail, and that won't be too good. So, there's gonna be anarchy, militia, and all that type of stuff.
R: O.K. So what kinds of shows or channels do you watch that you find a lot of your information on?
DJ: Um, Discovery Channel, Science Channel, um, CNN. And the shows I watch are "Revolution," um, I forgot…
R: O.K. And so they've been talking about this kind of thing.
DJ: Yeah.
R: O.K. What is the greatest accomplishment that you've had in your years of schooling?
DJ: (long pause) To make anything higher than a 2.0.
R: What do you think about students who make good grades? Some people are made fun of, or, like, there's peer pressure that some of the people in your class have talked about. Do you see any of that, and what do you think of kids who make good grades?
DJ: The kids who make really good grades, like, they're really good, and they do all their work and do what they have to do instead of just clownin' around and all that type of stuff.
R: So are they people that you look up to or no?
DJ: Yeah. They gonna be, like, president, or be something someday.
R: Are those people that you strive to be like?
DJ: (long pause) Nah.
R: Well, do you strive to be a good student?
DJ: Oh, yeah, yeah. I wanna be a really good student.
R: O.K. What does education mean for you in your future?
DJ: (pause) Mmm…like, to me, education, like, let me put it to you like this—you hate school, but you love education; you love education 'cause it can get you somewhere instead of nowhere. That's what I think about education.
R: O.K. What motivates you to try hard in school?
DJ: My family and friends 'cause, like, they tell you "you have to do this; you have to do that, or you won't never get nowhere." And, man, it's the truth, though. I mean, I can't even get a job at McDonald's if I don't have no diploma.
R: Do you remember if you were read to as a child?
DJ: One time…(pause) I think it was one summer…(long pause) I'm tryin' to remember; um, I know it had happened, I mean, it really…
R: So you do remember at a time, but you don't remember that it, that it was regularly.
DJ: No.
R: O.K.
DJ: Oh, oh, oh—when I had to watch my little brother, and he was, like, nine, and I was fifteen, and I was like "I could watch him." They didn't trust me or nothin' like that. She didn't think I was really ready yet. (?)

R: Um, O.K. So what makes you who you are? What makes you unique?
DJ: My self—doin' the things that I do instead of following others or try to do things that others try to do.
R: O.K. Is there a motto or some sort of saying that you live your life by?
DJ: "Be you."
R: O.K. What does it mean to be an African American man? Is it different from being any other race of a man? Is there something unique about being an African American man?
DJ: No. We all, like, the same people; we just a different color.
R: O.K. So what is the ultimate man then? What does it mean to be a man?
DJ: What it means to be a man? They got a lot of definitions, and I could give you a lot, too.
R: But to you.
DJ: To me…(pause)
R: Like, when you look at somebody and say "that's a man," what are we talking about?
DJ: A man that works hard, a man that does what he has to do, provides for his family and others, and a man that can take care of his business.
R: O.K. So then is a drug dealer, who makes fast money on the streets, a man?
DJ: No. He's not a man. He's just a junkie.
R: He's a junkie? O.K. Somebody mentioned a little while ago this idea of getting famous, that a lot of guys want to be known. Talk about that for a second.
DJ: That's gonna take a lot of hard work. You can't expect just to get there. You gotta do shows; you gotta pull off gigs; you gotta create a demo; you gotta try to, like, get a recording studio, not…
R: Is this just about music, or is this about life in general?
DJ: Life in general; oh, yeah, you gotta get people to know you, too.
R: In a good way or in a bad way or does it matter?
DJ: Oh, in a good way. It's not in a bad…I always take both sides 'cause you talk about drugs and money and all that stuff, they want bad people, they gonna get their money from the bad people; the good side, you talk about doin' good things and all that other stuff, lyrics gonna get the good side, so if you can do both in a song, you can get money from both sides.
R: O.K. So can somebody still get known even if they're not a singer or a rapper?
DJ: Yeah.
R: O.K. Let me ask you one final question. What do you want me or anybody else who reads my work to know about African American boys?
DJ: That we no different from anybody else. I mean, we all the same kids.
R: O.K. That concludes our interview. Thank you so much for your time.

Interview: Sosa
12/20/12
Location: Upstairs hallway outside classroom

R: Talk about your experiences with school. Like, tell me about your experiences with school. Like, looking back over elementary, middle, and high school, just, if you could tell me about anything with your schooling…
Sosa: When I was in elementary school, I used to have a 4.0. In middle school, I was still good, but I started hating school.

R: After middle school or during middle school?
Sosa: During middle school.
R: You started hating school. What do you think might have been the reason why?
Sosa: I don't know.
R: Did you find elementary school to be more interesting? Or did it get harder? Did school get harder for you or…
Sosa: (long pause)
R: Or did something happen in your personal life that maybe made school seem like it wasn't that important?
Sosa: Not really. I started smoking, but I was still coming to school.
R: And this was in middle school?
Sosa: Around the end of middle school.
R: O.K. And when you say you started smoking, you mean marijuana.
Sosa: Mmhmm.
R: O.K. Do you think that had a significant impact on how you see school?
Sosa: Kind of.
R: O.K. What impact has it had on you, do you think? How have you changed as a person as a result?
Sosa: Um…(long pause) I don't think I really changed; I do some stuff that I wouldn't have did back then…(long pause)
R: O.K. Regarding school, what classes in school are you liking best and why?
Sosa: I like English because I like reading and writing.
R: O.K. When you say you like English because you like reading and writing, do you do any reading or writing outside of school?
Sosa: Sometimes.
R: O.K. When you read outside of school, what kinds of things do you read?
Sosa: Um, I like Greek mythology.
R: Greek mythology?
Sosa: Yeah.
R: O.K. If you write outside of school, what kinds of things do you write?
Sosa: If I'm really bored, I'll write a little short story; most of the time, I just write raps.
R: O.K. You write raps. What are some of the subjects of your raps. Like, what might your raps be about?
Sosa: About life, school, all types of stuff.
R: O.K.
Sosa: …that I see every day and stuff like that.
R: O.K. You're saying very generally "stuff like that" and "stuff that goes on." Tell me about that. What kinds of things are you talking about, that you're seeing, that you're writing, because a lot of times when people write poems and raps, they're trying to get something off their chest, or they're trying to deal with something. What is it that you're talking about specifically?
Sosa: A whole lot of stuff. I talk about stuff I see every day…
R: Like?
Sosa: Gangs, guns, drugs, type of stuff like that, but it's not just negative like that. I talk positive, too. Sometimes, anyway, you know, you see everything that's going on out there, and you know you don't have to do that. But some people choose to do it anyway, knowing they could do better stuff than that.

R: So are you talking about yourself?
Sosa: Yeah. (laughs)
R: O.K. Now let's back up a little bit because you talked about guns and things that you see. What neighborhood do you live in?
Sosa: I live in Marydale.
R: In Marydale.
Sosa: Yeah.
R: O.K. What kind of neighborhood is Marydale?
Sosa: Uh, it's straight, to me. I'm used to stuff like that, me.
R: O.K. Because to so many people, it has a reputation, the neighborhood does…
Sosa: Yeah.
R: Because people have things that they've heard or whatever. How would you describe it?
Sosa: (pause) It's a cool place to live, really. But the drug stuff can, like, really be bad.
R: O.K. So then let me ask you this question: Is it a place where you would want to raise a family and have children?
Sosa: No. (laughs)
R: No. O.K. Um, why would it, why would you not want to raise your own kids in that neighborhood?
Sosa: 'Cause I wouldn't want my kids seeing all of that, hearing about the stuff I did, or hearing about the stuff that I did in the past and stuff like that.
R: So you're just worried about them finding out from other people who live in the neighborhood, things that you did when you were younger.
Sosa: Yeah. 'Cause people make mistakes.
R: O.K. So is the environment of your neighborhood, are there drugs and violence and things in your neighborhood that you witness?
Sosa: Yeah.
R: O.K. Um, what about classes here that are not your favorites? No names mentioned as far as teachers, but what are some classes maybe that you, are not your favorite?
Sosa: Uh, I don't like math.
R: A lot of your friends have said that they don't like math either. What is it about math that you don't like?
Sosa: I just don't like math.
R: Is it difficult for you?
Sosa: No. We just, we do too much, too much.
R: O.K. What about in school, your writing and reading in school? What kinds of writing do you like to do in school?
Sosa: Writing stories, stuff like that.
R: O.K. What about reading? What kinds of things do you like to read in school?
Sosa: If it's a good book, I'll read it. If it's not good, I'll try it.
R: O.K. What do you consider a good book?
Sosa: Somethin' with a nice plot and a good story line.
R: O.K. What about this book Monster that we just finished reading? What that considered, would you consider that a good book?
Sosa: Yeah.
R: Why?
Sosa: Because it kinda relate to me, how it (pause)…

R: O.K. It's a book about a gangsta, typically, who goes to jail for a drugstore robbery. How does that relate to you?
Sosa: 'Cause I'm facing adult life, well, not adult life, but 'til I'm twenty-one, for two simple robbery charges.
R: O.K. And you currently have an ankle bracelet on, at this time, and you're awaiting trial, correct?
Sosa: Yes, ma'am.
R: O.K. Um, how do you feel about that, like, whatever that is that you were involved in? Do you regret it? If you could go back, would you change things? How, what are your feelings on that?
Sosa: If I could go back, I would change things; I would change a lot of stuff.
R: Like?
Sosa: That day. I would change that. I would change a lot of stuff…(long pause)
R: Such as?
Sosa: If I could go back in the past and stop me from smokin' that first weed, I'd change that, too.
R: Have you been able to stop yourself from doing that at the current time?
Sosa: Right now, yeah.
R: O.K. Um, what difficulties and challenges have you faced throughout school? What's been the hardest thing for you?
Sosa: (long pause) I don't know…just coming to school. (laughs)
R: O.K. What is it about school, and we talked about this earlier, that you just don't get, that you just don't like? Are you not connecting with your teachers? Do you not see the purpose of school for you? What, what is it about…
Sosa: They teach us some unnecessary stuff.
R: O.K. They teach you unnecessary stuff. Like, you mean, like, things that you don't think you're going to use?
Sosa: Yeah.
R: O.K. What, um, what do you see yourself doing when you leave here?
Sosa: What, after school? Or when I graduate?
R: When you graduate.
Sosa: I don't know.
R: O.K. So you don't have a plan yet as far as your future? Do you think about your future at all?
Sosa: Yeah.
R: Do you think about what you might want to be in the future?
Sosa: Sometimes. I hope. The only thing I got planned for my future is hoping I'm not dead or in jail.
R: O.K. Um, what motivates you to try hard in school? If you ever try hard in school, or when you're trying to get yourself up for school, what motivates you?
Sosa: I don't know. (laughs)
R: O.K. We're going to back up to your family. You live with Mom right now? Or Dad or both?
Sosa: My grandmother.
R: Your grandmother. O.K. If you don't mind talking about it, what happened to your parents?
Sosa: My dad dead. My mom, she never was around. She was always in and out of jail.
R: O.K. Your dad passed away when you were how old?
Sosa: Nine.

R: When you were nine? Was it sudden?
Sosa: He was sick.
R: He was sick. I'm very sorry about that. So you've grown up with your grandmother.
Sosa: Yeah.
R: Do you have any siblings?
Sosa: I got three brothers.
R: Younger or older?
Sosa: Older. I'm the youngest child.
R: You're the youngest child. O.K. What, what is the story on your brothers? Are they around? Are they working somewhere?
Sosa: They around. One of 'em, one of 'em in the National Guard, so he stay home, but I see him sometimes.
R: O.K. Within your family who you live with, is education important to them? Like, do they tell you often "you need to go to school; you need to get educated"?
Sosa: Yeah.
R: They do tell you that?
Sosa: Yeah.
R: O.K. What about in the home—do you remember being read to as a young child? Did your parents or anybody ever read to you?
Sosa: Nope.
R: No? O.K. As far as books at home, do you have books in your home, like novels…
Sosa: Yeah, books that I buy.
R: O.K. Like, novels or, like, magazines? Or both?
Sosa: Novels.
R: O.K. And most of those, like you were talking about, are Greek mythology?
Sosa: Yeah.
R: O.K. Um, just a couple more things—and you're doing a good job. Um, what is the most important thing to you in your life?
Sosa: Staying alive.
R: Staying alive. O.K. O.K. Talk about African American males. In school, do you find that African American males are looked down on, looked up to, seen as about the same as white males, treated the same? Tell me about that.
Sosa: We looked down on. Everywhere we go, it's always the same, everywhere you go with us.
R: Explain that.
Sosa: Like, me, I was told we always got more to prove just because we black. Like, we always got more to prove, and people always lookin' down on us just because we black.
R: O.K. Do you find that, here at school, that you see the same thing regarding teachers and administrators toward you?
Sosa: Sometimes. Not all the teachers, some of 'em.
R: O.K. You feel like they treat you differently or that they look down on you.
Sosa: Yeah.
R: O.K. Is an African American man, the whole "man" thing, is that different from being a white man?
Sosa: Yeah.
R: Why?

Sosa: ‘Cause, like, we don’t live that carefree life like y’all think we do; we gotta work for everything we got. Ain’t nothin’ come to us easy. Except for jail. That comes easy, jail. We got pressure. We got that 100% hard pressure on us since we been young; everything always pressuring us to do better, be better. But the pressure don’t always make us be better. It make some of us stray from the path to the wrong path, and that’s how it ends.
R: O.K. So you’re saying that at some point, you just give up.
Sosa: Yeah.
R: And you go the wrong way because you can’t keep up with the pressure and the expectations anymore.
Sosa: Yeah.
R: O.K. Is that what you feel maybe happened to you after middle school?
Sosa: Yeah.
R: Were there moments in middle school where you feel like your teachers and you maybe didn’t connect or that you started feeling like school wasn’t for you?
Sosa: Yeah.
R: O.K. What do you want—and this is the last question—other people to know through my work that I’m doing, about African American males?
Sosa: That we, we the same as everybody else, bro. Just because we black don’t mean we go out there and sell drugs, don’t mean we go out there and kill people and stuff like that. We the same as anybody else. That’s it.
R: O.K. Being with your current situation, is there something in you right now that’s saying “maybe I can make things better or maybe I can fix this” or something? Or are you at the point right now where you have just given up?
Sosa: Like, if I had a pocket full of cash right now, and somebody was asking me for one, I wouldn’t give it to ‘em. (laughs)
R: One what?
Sosa: I don’t care. Like, sometimes, I really don’t care about what happens. (?)
R: O.K. Thank you very much. You did a very good job.

Focus group interview: Simmons 3rd period 2/8/13

Al
Ray
DJ
Dee
Jay—out

Interview took place in the classroom while other groups of students wrapped up the week’s assignments in their groups. Some quiet conversations occurred in these other groups while the researcher held the focus group interview, but these other groups were not distracting, nor were the participants noticeably aware of the presence of the other students throughout this interview.

Participants talked about how most students there who say they are “gangstas” aren’t really gangstas. Dj talked about the fact that he has seen “real” gangstas in New Orleans and California

(his personal experiences), and they "shoot to kill people." Kids here just shoot at the ground or in the air to scare people.

The group also talked about the black male students who pretend like they are hard and tough, say they're not doing their homework, then go home and worry about it and do it.

Al does not subscribe to the typical AA male scene; tries to make himself appear separate from them. Prides himself on having been raised differently to know better; has "home training."

Focus group interview: 3/15/13
Simmons 2nd period
Location: Table in school library

Nate—here
John—here
Bob—here
Dee—here
Sosa—out
BMore—out

R: O.K. I want to know, just basically, what did you get out of this novel unit that we did? With the two novels and me as a researcher coming in to talk to you, and this whole thing was focused on African American males—what did you, did you, or what did you get out of this whole experience?
John: I like, I could relate to some of the books. I, I ain't tryin' to go to jail like in Monster, I ain't tryin' to go to jail, so…and I ain't tryin' to have a baby either (like in First Part Last). So…
R: So then how can you relate? If you're saying you're not trying to go to jail, you're not trying to have a baby—how can you relate then?
John: I don't know; I went to court and stuff; never been to jail.
R: O.K. You went to court and all, so you've been through that process before.
John: Yeah, I ain't tryin' to go to jail, though.
R: Do you mind telling me briefly what that was about?
John: For fighting.
R: Fighting?
John: Yeah.
R: In school?
John: No. Out of school.
R: O.K. Alright. Tate, what did you get out of this whole experience—with the novels, with me coming in and talking to you guys…
Tate: Like he said, I could relate to some of it. I been in trouble a couple of times. And a baby, I ain't tryin' to have a baby right now.
R: Why wouldn't you want to have a baby right now?
Tate: Still in school, and I wanna be able to take care of it like I want to. Wanna wait, be successful with a job, all that stuff, then have a child.
R: O.K. Dee, what about you? What did you get out of this whole experience?

Dee: Like, some of the stuff in the stories I could relate to. Like, I wouldn't be tryin' to be with people who do stuff that's gonna get you in trouble 'cause they gonna try to set you up so you could, like, get in trouble with them. And, like they said, I wouldn't wanna have no baby early 'cause I gotta work with school and all that, and I got other stuff.
R: Did that novel (FPL) make you feel more strongly about that? Did it change your opinion at all? Like, after reading that novel, are you like "Gosh, I surely am not doing that now!"? Or do you feel about the same?
Dee: I feel the same because I already had a firm grip that I wasn't going to have a baby while I'm in school or whatever.
R: O.K. Bob, what about you?
Bob: Just watch who you around because you be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and they judge you judge because you black or whatever.
R: Let's talk about that for a second. Do any of you guys feel like you get prejudged just because you're black?
Dee: Yep.
Keeton: Yep.
Tate: Yep.
Bob: Sometimes.
R: O.K. Explain that.
Tate: It happened to me. That's why I had ISS (in-school suspension).
R: It happened to you. That's why you had ISS. And why? Like, explain.
Tate: We were in class, right. Did I say something? Did I talk like…the tornado drill, we had a tornado drill, and we were by some windows. The class got up and walked outside, but the teacher was like "We not supposed to go outside; stay in the class." But we already knew we were supposed to go outside because they got windows. So the assistant principal passed by, and you know, you do something wrong, you get wrote up for it. And he told her (teacher), like, we not supposed to be in the classroom. And she's like, "Oh, I couldn't hear the announcement 'cause of them (students)." Well, we wasn't even talkin'! And then she said, she made us go in the class and write the whole book, a book, a whole book. And I just looked back, I looked back, I didn't say nothin', I just looked back, like "Uhhh." And then she just told me to get out. And she wrote me up. And on the behavior report, she put that I don't participate, and I always walk in class laughing, talking—nothing concerning the tornado drill; she just put all kinda stuff on there, stuff that's not true. But I couldn't explain 'cause I tried to explain, but the principal, he like "I believe you, Tate." But I know he didn't believe me, so I just went do the day of ISS.
R: So you went and did your time even though you didn't feel that you deserved it.
Tate: Yeah. I was tryin' to get my suspension (out of school instead of in school), but they wouldn't let me go home.
R: Has anybody else had that experience before? Or any other experience where they feel like, because of the color of their skin, that they've been wronged in some way?
Dee: Me.
R: You? O.K. Explain. Go ahead. I want to hear it.
Dee: Alright. Like, we was playin', one day, we was playin' basketball at St. Joseph (Catholic elementary school with playground area with basketball cement area, not surrounded by fencing, so open to anyone). And, like, when we was playin', the police came over there and told us that, uh, make sure we don't break nothin'. Like, one of the cops that came, he said make sure we don't break nothin', we can play on it as long as we don't mess up anything. "If y'all get hurt, if

one of y'all get hurt, call 911, then call your momma." And they was, like, you know, warning us. And then another police came, and he was talkin' about we had to leave. We tried to tell him that the police came and told us already what happened and what we gotta do, and he was getting' mad, talkin' about, "I could arrest y'all." And it was a white cop. And then, like, one day that same cop came, and they had some white dudes over there (at the playground) that was playin' with us, and he ain't never said nothin'. He just came over there and just looked and then left. But I wanna know why he told us something when it was just all black dudes instead of when the white dudes was there, he didn't say nothin'.
R: So you feel like, had that been a group of white dudes, that they wouldn't have even messed with them.
Dee: Yeah. Yeah. Somethin' like that. They watch us.
Tate: I gotta say, man, you see a group of black dudes…
Dee: Yeah, they always expect somethin'…
Tate: Yeah, they go watch 'em…
Dee: Oh, they got drugs. Oh, they got guns.
Tate: Like, when we was in a car, just three people in a car, they just stopped us, just to see what was in the car.
John: Yeah, like me and my brother, we was just walkin', and it was, like, 9:30 at night, like that was a few years back, we were walkin', and like, the cops had stopped us, and like, he came, he was searching us and stuff…
Tate: Like, they can't just pull you over and stuff…
John: Yeah, like, search…
Tate: Yeah, when you not doin' nothin', you could just be walkin' on the sidewalk, a group of cops'll search you, search all of us, tell you to empty your pockets.
Dee: Yeah, my cousin, we were coming back from the mall one night, and the police had pulled us over, and he got a Cadillac, and they, well, they think, like, Cadillacs is like drug dealer cars. So they stopped us, and they was like, and we had to get out the car, they patted us down, they put us in handcuffs, and they was like "You got somethin' illegal in the car?" My cousin was like "What you mean, 'something illegal'?" And they was like "You got any drugs?" My cousin was like "Just because I got a Cadillac don't mean I sell drugs." So, he was like "Alright." He went to the car and came back, and they was like "We gotta search the car." So they was searchin' the car; they didn't find nothin'. They was like "Y'all must've swallowed the drugs or somethin'." What you mean 'we swallowed the drugs'? We didn't even have nothin'.
Tate: Yeah! We was in the parking lot; the police just swerved in the parking lot. It was around nine, it was around 9:30. They say "What y'all doin' this time of night?" I said, "We just chillin'." We were just chillin', we were waitin' on (friend) to call us 'cause he was at somebody's house, so we went down there to pick him up 'cause we didn't know where to go, so we just parked right there, and we tried to explain, and he started, uh, checking the car, and he's like, "Y'all have drugs in there?" And we're like, "No." And the police like "Y'all prob'ly got rid of 'em." And we, we never even have drugs…
R: So it seems like there's this assumption that y'all are a certain way just because you're black.
Group: Yeah, uh huh.
R: Does that impact the way that you view authority? Like the way you think about people who are in charge?
Group: Yeah.
Tate: That's why I got that attitude against police now.

Dee: Uh huh. You see Officer Himel (white school resource officer at the school), he cool.
Group: Uh huh.
John: He ain't like them.
Tate: That's the coolest police I know.
R: Why is he cool?
Tate: He try to help you.
Dee: Yeah, he try to help you. Like, when I got in trouble one time in class, and I got written up, he was talking to me, like, it don't matter what race you is, he'll still talk to you and try to help you out, tell you what to do. If it would've been another police, he woulda got on me.
Tyler: Like, you get in trouble for something stupid like a cellphone or, like, a shirt, a different color undershirt, he take you on the side and say "I don't agree with that rule either, but you just gotta follow it." And stuff like that. He'll try to help you.
R: So he makes you feel like he's on your side.
Group: Yeah.
R: O.K. Is it the same way with teachers? Like, the experiences you've had with policemen, do you have similar experiences or feel like teachers feel the same way?
Tate: I'm gonna tell you, like, I seen it one time, like, real talk, like, a black student was getting, like, you know, fussed at bad, bad for, like, an untucked shirt. And the teacher looked at the white students, they don't even say nothin'.They don't even say nothin'. Like, it's like they don't even notice it on them. Like, I seen teachers fuss at a lot of children, like, you know, hollering at 'em, but then another student'll come, and they'll change their whole attitude, like they was happy the whole day.
Dee: Um hmm.
R: Dee, you were gonna say something, too.
Dee: Like, sometimes, like, they'll have one teacher, and they'll let you go in a class with an untucked shirt until another teacher sees, like, if y'all walkin' to the computer lab, and another teacher see you and tell you to tuck in your shirt, and they gonna be like "I been tell you to tuck in your shirt." You ain't never said that!
Tate: Yeah! You right! You right!
John: I hate when they be doin' that.
Tate: I think they be getting' together and talkin' about that.
R: Now, Bob you've kind of quiet. Do you have anything at all as far as opinions on any of this?
Bob: I'm gonna say, last year when I was about to transfer here, everybody was talkin' about how this was an all-white school or whatever. So when I went, I'm thinkin' I'm gonna be judged, but I never really had that problem when I went there. I guess the way I act. I stick out from everybody. That's what everybody said, I stick out from everybody, I don't act like everybody else.
R: You don't act like everybody else—which 'everybody else'? The white kids or the black kids?
Bob: Black kids.
R: The black kids. You don't act like the black kids.
Bob: No.
R: O.K. When you came to (this school) from (the rival neighboring public high school), did you have a different experience here? Or is it the same?
Bob: It's different.
R: Why is it different?

Bob: I mean…it's kinda the same, kinda different. But you see more people actin' up or whatever. It's hard to explain. You gotta go out and see it for yourself.
R: So you find the students here are a little more, um, a little crazier, a little more misbehaving?
Bob: Not really.
R: Messy?
Bob: Yeah. Yeah.
R: And when you say that you don't act black, that you act more white—what does that mean?
Bob: That means, like, most black kids you see, like, fighting, being messy, sagging hard. I mean, I clown around, but I take it seriously, I don't try to get in trouble. I just do what I have to do.
R: What's this whole thing where these black boys that I've been talking to say that education is important, and then they go and clown around in class? What's that about?
Tate: 'Cause school the same thing, just a different day. Being in class is the same thing, just a different day.
Dee: And it's boring.
Tate: Yeah. It's boring. You ain't got nothin' else to do, so you clown.
John: Nothin' important, like, you know.
Tate: If they would make school, like, kinda fun, I wouldn't mind getting' up early in the morning, comin' to school.
Dee: For real.
Tate: But comin' to school just to get in trouble, that's how I feel. You see how he wearin' a black shirt (refers to Bob), if I wear a black shirt, they comin', like a teacher literally, I had my shirt buttoned up, she literally came behind me to look in back of my shirt to see what kind of shirt I got. Just so she can write me up.
R: So you feel like you're harassed.
Tate: Yeah. Every time. That's every time!
Dee: Yeah. It happened to me, too.
R: O.K. So then what purpose does school have for you? Is it just like a thing like jail where you're just doing your time?
Tate: We come to get the education. But we gotta wear a white undershirt, one undershirt. Why we gotta wear a certain color undershirt? Why we can't wear a certain kind of sock?
John: It's good that we come to school. If it wasn't for the students come to school, teachers wouldn't have a job.
Nate: Yeah. For real.
Dee: And, to me, you could still get a education, like, without students wearing uniforms…
Tate: Yeah.
Dee: What you mean we not gonna learn? Just because you just have a red shirt on or a black shirt on, that mean you not gonna learn today. What that got to do with it?
Tate: I never had, like, a behavior report for talkin' back to a teacher 'cause I don't do that. I don't talk back to my elders, grownups. But I get in trouble for shirts and belts.
John: I feel like it's not that serious, but…
Tate: I get written up again, I'm suspended from school. All that for a uniform violation. And I'm comin' to school to learn somethin', but I still get in trouble. That's like, I just come to school to get in trouble, for stupid stuff, for a shirt, for socks. Man, it don't make sense. Why it be like that?

R: Let me ask you a question because y'all talked about school and education just now. Do y'all feel like what you do in school has something to do with what you're going to do for your career…
Tate: No.
R: …for your job? Does it have anything to do with the rest of your life?
Bob: Not yet.
John: No, not really.
Dee: No.
John: Half the stuff we learn, it gonna be irrelevant, to anything.
Tate: Stuff we learn in biology, in chemistry, when you, I mean, you ain't never see that in life.
Dee: And math, algebra…
Tate: Like, that's why I'm glad they came up with the opting out (career diploma vs. core-four track). Like, they pick all the classes you not gonna need in life, and they take 'em off your schedule and give you, like, an extra elective class or somethin'. That's why, I'm gonna do that at the end of April.
Dee: Like, they be havin', like, I don't think, like, ok, they ask you what you wanna be when you grow up. I think you should specifically take those classes instead of extra stuff.
Tate: Yeahhh.
Dee: Unless you got, like, a plan B, plan C. You just take the classes you know.
Tate: Yeah, I'm makin' Fs for nothin'! Like, I don't know nothin' about this.
John: For real.
R: So you guys don't see the need to be exposed to these other things, just to be educated?
Tate: Yeah. Then they make the day long…
Dee: You know what you wanna be when you grow up. Say you wanna, you wanna be a mathematician. Why you need science if you going do this? But you might need it for the numbers. All you need is the basic stuff. You don't need all that advanced math, calculus and all that.
Tate: Why you need all that if you going mess with chemicals?
Dee: Well, I understand you might need the proper amount of numbers or whatever you might need. You already know that already, so why take all that extra math and all that?
R: So you should just come to school for the things you need for your job.
Group: Yeahhh.
Tate: Yeahhh. For the things you wanna be.
Dee: Like, say, like, like, he say he wanna go to the NFL. What, what's biology gotta do with going to the NFL?
John: Well, no, that's not really, like, a job. Really, I really wanna do somethin' with electrician and all that. I wish all I had to do was take ag (agriculture) classes and all that.
Dee: Yeah. That's gonna help you out, ag classes.
John: Stuff like that.
Tate: Yeah. Welding classes.
Dee: Like, that's how I feel, like, if you, if they'd ask you what you wanna be when you grow up, all right. You tell 'em, if you don't have nothin', try to think of one soon, and if you don't have one, tell 'em one, and then you take those classes to help you get that job.
Tate: And you know what else teachers do? They teach us the hard way, knowin' they got a easy way to it, but they want you to learn it the hard way. Man, if they got a easy way, just teach that, so I could make a good grade on a test or somethin'!

R: Let me ask y'all a question because this has come up a lot. What about these kids who are in their classes and, like, when the teacher assigns homework, they make like they're not gonna do it. And, like, they're all 'big and bad and tough'. And then they go home, and they're all worried about their studies and…there's a word for it…
John: They got a word for it; I just ain't gonna say it.
R: (laughing) No. It's O.K. But why, why do they do that? Why do they put up this front…
Tate: I guess they tryin' to act like somethin' they not.
Dee: Um hmm.
R: Is to try to impress their friends?
John: Must be.
Tate: Be a gangsta.
R: Why does everybody wanna be a gangsta?
John: I ain't tryin' to be no gangsta.
Tate: Well, that's why I do, I don't act, like, you know, like, people try to act, act like that because other people, it's just some people, that's how they was raised, like, some people. Like, I been knowin' that all my life. All my life. I never changed.
Bob: Like, some people, they get to high school, and they think they top-notch.
Tate: Yeah. Like, I ain't gonna never change, man, how I came, how I grew. Man, I'm gonna always be myself.
Dee: Man, some people I went to middle school with, we was close. We had this tight clique. And now, it's like, everybody won't look me in the face any more; it's like when I see 'em, I wanna smack 'em.
R: Why?
Tate: It's the way they changed.
Dee: Because it's the way they act. The way they act. Man, you supposed to, man, we was like this (crosses fingers, meaning they were close).
John: Yeahhh.
Dee: And now it's like, I can't look in these dudes' faces.
R: How have they changed?
Tate: Look, somethin' like this. Look, we used to be at school…Matter of fact, you did that, he did that before (motions to Bob). Like, in sixth grade, nobody liked him. I used to stop them from beatin' him up! And we got in, like, we got in, like, seventh grade. Like, he wasn't really talkin' to me, like…
Dee: He started changin'…
Tate: He started changin', like, he never even wanna be nowhere around me. I'm the one, if it wasn't for me, man, you'd (gestures toward Bob) prob'ly have black eyes right now.
Group: Laughs.
Tate: The dudes that wanted to fight him, they really was, they outta school right now.
R: What was going on? Why would they want to fight him?
Tate: I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. But I always used to go, I always used to help him. Man, don't, like, me, like, in school, like, it's like, I grew up with the dudes, like, so I never really got picked on. I be chillin', I be chillin', speakin' like some real stuff, so people like that, I guess they respect that. Every time I see 'em, I'm like "Man, leave that boy alone. Don't do him nothin'." They'll leave him alone. But when I'm not around, they're gettin' on him and stuff. I'm like "Mannn…"
R: Bob? Do they still pick on you?

Tate: Nah. They don't do it anymore. Everybody since, that was when we was younger, but as soon as we got grown, older, like in high school, it ain't nothin' like that no more. But it's like the people you used to hang with act funny with you now, like don't talk to you now. But in middle school, y'all could have been close, but come high school, they hang with new people and don't talk to you anymore.
Bob: I was in middle school, then I had left and went to a new school. Then I came back. And since I been back, nobody wanna, some people don't wanna talk to me.
R: Why do you think that is? Are they trying to put up a front?
Tate: You (speaking to Bob) know why. You know Thibodaux don't get along with Raceland.
Dee: Yeah, they think he from Raceland because he used to go to Central.
R: So let me ask you this. This whole, this whole, you know, "thug" life or whatever. Why would you want to be seen as somebody bad?
John: I just be chillin', I don't know.
R: O.K. So none of you would consider yourselves gangstas.
Tate: Nah.
Dee: No.
Tate: I don't consider myself as a thug or nothin', but I don't know how to explain, I don't know how to explain. I don't go around sayin' "I'm a thug, I'm a gangsta."
John: Yeah.
Tate: I just keep everything low key. I don't bother anybody...
John: That's what I do, too.
R: Are there black guys at this school who try to say that they're gangstas?
Group: Yeah. Oh, yeah.
Dee: A lot of 'em.
Tate: They got people, man, y'all know what I'm talkin' about. They got people in the hallway. They like "We gangstas, man. Ain't nobody mess with us. Nobody can't touch us." Stuff like that. But if they get in trouble, they'll cry or somethin'.
Dee: Yeah, when they about to fight and all that…
Tate: Man, I just be sittin' back. I don't even say nothin'. I don't let nobody bother me. I just be chillin'. I don't say nothin'.
R: Go ahead, John.
John: When they about to fight, they be like, they don't come at you by themselves. They come, like, with their whole family, everybody. They be makin' you think they getting' ready to shoot or somethin'.
Tate: I ain't gonna lie, I'm watchin' this video of a dude runnin' from a fight, but he's at school tryin' to ponk (punk) everybody.
John: Oh, I know exactly what you talkin' about.
Tate: Made me think of somebody in class. He got his whole clique, his whole family, tryin' to get me in the bathroom. I'm by myself pretty much. He got all his friends or whatever.
R: And so how did you get out of that?
Tate: I just left it alone.
John: And, see, if you in that situation, see I ain't never really had that situation.
Dee: Me either.
John: 'Cause, like, I got, like, respect from, like, people know my brother and all, like…
Tate: Like, I never really, you know, I never felt like, to be hit on, like, somebody try to get me in the bathroom, but if you show, that's how it is…

John: You show you scared…
Dee: You show you not scared, nobody gonna mess with you.
Tate: You show a sign of fear, that's it.
Dee: You show you're scared, that's it.
R: So is that why they put up this gangsta image, like they're hardened and tough?
Group: Yeah.
Dee: They act like they hard so they not scared.
Tate: I grew up, I grew up fightin' everybody, everybody, when I was young. You know, like, I never, like, if they notice, I never let nobody, like, tell me somethin' or, you know, try to ponk me or try to take somethin' from me.
John: That's why in elementary school, I used to be wild like that, too.
Tate: And so, that's why, when I got older, they could look at me and say "Gosh, man, I respect him; I ain't never gonna mess with him."
Bob: Middle school is like, when I first got to East (middle school), like, everybody was asking me if I'm new, I'm not from Thibodaux, everybody pickin' on me. And, like, I never really got in a fight with, like, somebody over there. Man, say, like if I go to Central (rival high school down the bayou) today, man, I'm prob'ly gettin' jumped every day. They could look at you, like "Oh, he from Thibodaux," and people in the bathroom…
R: Is it that big of a deal where you're from?
Group: Yeah.
Bob: Like, somebody from Thibodaux go to Raceland, man, forget that!
Tate: Or somebody from Central come over here today, they gonna be fightin'.
R: Well, is it that bad within Thibodaux? Like, against the neighborhoods? Like, Government Circle and Marydale.
Dee: Oh, no. If Marydale go to the ridge, oh, that's it!
John: Oh, yeah, you know, the ridge.
R: Johnson Ridge? (street on edge of parish with reputation for drug dealers)
Dee: Uh huh.
R: O.K. What neighborhoods in Thibodaux get along, and which ones don't?
Dee: All of 'em get along.
Tate: See, Cross Town (area behind St. Joseph Church in Thibodaux), Cross Town, man, we don't never see nobody beefin'. Everybody hang with everybody. Everyone just chillin'. And everywhere you go, you know somebody. If you don't know 'em, they say, "What's up? What's happenin', man?" But man, you go to Marydale, they try to go in your pockets! They try to see who you is. And, man, if they notice you, and they say, "Man, he from Thibodaux. He cool." But if they see a group of, it's like the same thing, if they see, if a group of dudes come around here, they gettin' shot at. And if a group of, uh, Thibodaux people go to Raceland…
Dee: Um hmm.
Tate: They gonna try to take you out the car…
John: Yeah.
Dee: It depends, like, some people, when they go to Raceland, they, they want all that. They go lookin' for that.
Tate: Yeah, you know, 'cause I went, matter of fact, when I went to Raceland one weekend, it was at night, they had some dudes, they had some dudes, they see, I don't see how they could look at you and know you not from there, and they got all parts of Raceland. So we went down

there. Man, they had some dudes, they come lookin' in the car, and I'm like "Man, what the fuck this dude doin'?"
Group: Laughs.
Tate: And they start pullin' on the car door. And I'm like "Man…" And then all the sudden, they just took off runnin', walkin' fast. And I'm like, "Let's go! This dude's, like, goin' get a gun or somethin'!"
R: Well, let me ask you this based on what you just said, and I'll ask all of y'all this. Is there a constant state of fear or anxiety or always looking over your shoulder that you guys live in?
Dee: Oh, no.
Tate: Oh, no.
John: I ain't never scared.
Tate: Like, like, sometimes, you know, we get a little nervous, like somethin' about to happen.
Dee: Yeah.
Tate: But in all that, I ain't never been scared. When I was young, you know, like children will be scared of the dark and stuff. Like, my brother and them used to do that to me, like put me in a dark room 'cause I do somethin' bad, like I'm supposed to be scared or somethin'. I never been scared, I don't know why…
R: Do y'all feel the same way?
Bob: At school, I feel like that (scared) sometimes. Like, you know, like a gotta watch my back.
Tate: But at school, I just be, nobody tell me nothin'.
Dee: That's the thing. Some people will tell me somethin' and they just think I ain't gonna react.
John: Dude, you just needa get your respect, that's all you needa do.
Tate: In middle school, man…
R: How do you get your respect?
Tate: Fightin'.
John: You just gotta do what you gotta do.
Dee: It's not fightin'. It's not fightin'.
John: You gotta show 'em you not scared of 'em. 'Cause black people sense fear, son.
Dee: Man, it's not, it's not, some boys, man, them boys not just gonna come up and punch you.
Tate: Yeah, they gonna really come, like, try to clown you to see if you gonna say somethin' back, and if you don't say nothin' back, it's a everyday thing.
Bob: It's a everyday thing.
Tate: So you gotta stand your ground the first time, like "Hell, he never did that." Like when they come and clown him (refers to Bob), he just be quiet, turn his back or somethin'. They be like, "Yeah." But, you know…
R: So how do you, so when do you learn how to be like that? Through middle school?
Tate: Yeah, you gotta grow up…
John: Show 'em you not scared of 'em
Tate: I grew up, like, man, like, I always went to school with all my cousins and stuff. Like, I never had to worry about nothin'. Nothin'. And they be sayin' how me and my cousins hang together, and you know, I'm gonna just put it like this. Man, you gotta grow up, you gotta be about your business.
R: Let me ask y'all a question. How do teachers get your respect?
Tate: Some teachers, like, some teachers…
Dee: It depends.

Tate: Like, yes ma'am, no ma'am. I get in trouble, I take my licks. I don't fuss back with the teacher or nothin'.
Dee: You gotta be about your manners.
Tate: Use your manners. Show your teacher, like, man, you could be a good person. Stuff like that.
Bob: Yeah, not all black people are bad.
Tate: See, like, the ISS (in-school suspension) teacher, she love me, bro. She love me, man.
R: O.K. So what kinds of teachers do y'all respect?
John: I respect the ones that respect me.
Dee: Yeah, you respect me, I respect them.
Tate: Not quick to write you up the first thing you do. "Get out my class! Write up!" Try to come talk to you, and I'm like, man, she tryin' to help me, I ain't gonna put her through this trouble.
R: Bob, what kinds of teachers do you respect?
Bob: Kinda, you know, I'm not a bad student. That's the thing. I'm not a bad student.
Tate: Teachers'll come in ISS, and they'll be like, "What you doin' in here? You not a bad student. You ain't never get in trouble in my class." And I tell 'em, "I ain't in here for disrespectin' a teacher. I'm in here for, like, undershirts."
Bob: And I never got caught with dress code. I don't know what it is.
Tate: Man, we used to, me and Bob used to get kicked outta class every day, in middle school. See I had got close with him in sixth grade. We used to, you know, we was young and bad. But I feel like I changed a lot. I used to clown all day.
John: In elementary school, I used to get in fights almost every day in elementary school.
Dee: I feel like nobody could tell me nothin'. I try to be this bad kid. Why? I don't know. Just to fit in.
R: Any last words, because the bell's gonna be ringing in a few minutes. Anybody have any last-minute things that I need to know or that you want anybody to know who's reading my work about African American males?
Dee: Well, like, I feel like at (this school), you gotta keep a low profile, mind your business.
Tate: That happened to somebody, you know, that dude Wade. He came down here, I think, from New Orleans. And they, they fought him every day.
John: You gotta keep a low profile, you gotta man up or whatever. If somebody come at you, you gotta do what you gotta do.
Dee: Like they said, don't be too good, but don't look at somebody and think "Oh, he scary" or just 'cause he black.
John: I think everybody should just be cool.
Tate: Just chill out. If you chillin', it don't make sense to go messin' with nobody.
John: Yeah, but you gotta be about your business, though. 'Cause, if not, then…they start when you young.
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Focus group interview
Simmons 3rd period
Location: At table in school library
3/15/13

Ray
John

DJ
Vinny
Jay—out

R: Let me just start off by asking you, what does school have to do with who you are?
DJ: Well, school has to do with who we are because school helps us find our identity.
R: Ok. School helps you find your identity how?
DJ: Because when you come to school, you meet people and everything else, and you get to express yourself, and you get to see who you really are and the things you like and the things you don't like.
R: Ok. What about you guys? (referring to Ray and Al; Vinny not yet present—at nurse). What does school have to do with who you are?
Ray and Al: (silence)
R: There's no right answer. It's just what you think.
Al: You prob'ly get to go more places if you have a higher education. That's why you wanna go to school, and it's important to go to school.
Ray: You meet new friends and stuff, like, get to meet more people than what you do at home.
R: Ok. Does school, does how successful you are in school have to do with how people see you or who you are?
Al: Yeah.
DJ: No. 'Cause people, some, they got people that don't know who you are and still judge you and stuff.
R: Ok. They have people who don't know who you are who still judge you.
DJ: Um hmm.
R: Ok. So then you're saying that school doesn't have anything to do with who you are and how others see you?
DJ: (Laughs). Ah, you caught…I don't know…
R: No, it's ok. Just tell me what you think.
DJ: Mmm…well, it's kinda both, you know.
R: Does school have anything to do with who a person is?
DJ: Um hmm.
R: Ok. You're shaking your head "yes". Um hmm. Tell me.
Al: All right. You go to school. And you have, like, a 4.0 gpa. Everybody's gonna look at you like "Oh, he's smart. He's very, very smart." But, then, you don't know if he's really cheatin' off of somebody to get that 4.0 gpa. But they just judge you just because you have a 4.0 gpa.
DJ: Must be a good cheater, then.
R: Ok. What about for black students, though? Is that 4.0 gpa a good thing? When people look at him and say, "Ooh, wow! He's smart!" Is it a good thing?
Al: Yeah. It's a good thing. But I rarely see a black person with a 4.0 gpa.
DJ: What's the difference between a white guy and a black guy having a 4.0 gpa? It's the same thing.
R: Ok. You just said something that I want you to explain. Go ahead.
Al: What?
R: That you rarely see a black person with a 4.0.
Al: Yeah. I rarely see a black person with a 4.0.
DJ: I see a lot of 'em.

Al: Name one that you know that got a 4.0!
DJ: Shamika…
Al: A boy, man!
DJ: A boy?
Al: Yeah.
DJ: They got…Tyler…
Al: A 4.0?
DJ: Sure, man…
Al: Not a 3.5. Come on, 4.0.
R: Ok. So do you think it's harder for them to get a 4.0? Or do you think that it's not important to them? Or are there other reasons?
DJ: My brother's another example. He made a 4.0 first, second, and third nine weeks.
Al: Well, he in the lower grades. (Then, in reference to the question) Ah, lemme see.
R: Is school not fair for them? Are they not smart enough to make 4.0s? Do they not apply themselves?
Al: They gotta apply themselves.
Vinny: You really gotta be dedicated. With school, you gotta have your mind on it. You gotta be dedicated to know, "All right. I'm gonna come to school, and I'm gonna do this." You already gotta have your future planned out. You know, you can't just…'cause I think, that kinda motivates you, like, you got your mind already planned on what you really wanna do, and you know that you need school to do it.
R: Ok. Let's talk about the novels. The two novels that we've done, the unit that we did, and then having me work with y'all to ask you questions about different things. What has been your experience? How would you rate this experience? What have you learned from this? Just kind of talk openly about it.
Al: Alright. *First Part Last*, that's not my type of book to read.
R: Why is it not your type of book to read?
Al: 'Cause I can't relate my life to something like that. 'Cause I'm not really raisin' something like that. (referencing a baby)
Ray: We need Jay (black male classmate whose girlfriend recently had baby; he has not been coming to school since birth several months ago).
Al: And, uh, *Monster*, it's, it's, you know, it's a wake up to, like, that any little thing you do, it can come back to haunt you in the future. Like, so be careful what you doin'. And I can relate that to my life so far.
R: Ok. Have you ever had something in your life that has come back to haunt you?
Vinny: I had something, yeah.
R: Ok. Vinny, you had something. Do you care to sort of tell in a very broad, vague way what that is?
Vinny: Mmm…
R: Was it, was it a, was it an incident with the law, with police (like in Monster)? Was it an incident with your family, with your friends?
Vinny: Both.
R: Both?
Vinny: Like, I was, like, thirteen. And, um, I was, I had got caught smokin'.
R: Ok.

Vinny: It come back to haunt you in the long run ‘cause that had brought shame to my momma and stuff like that.
R: Brought shame to your mom.
Vinny: Yeah.
R: Ok. Um, some of my students last hour talked about middle school and how hard middle school was for them and transitioning on into high school, there was a lot of bullying with them, where they had to, like, show that they were tough and show that they were a man and not show fear, that people would, you know, beat ‘em up or whatever. Can y’all kind of talk about that, your experiences?
DJ: Well, middle school was awesome to me.
Ray: I had fun at middle school, really.
DJ: If anything happened, I would beat ‘em up. I was the bully, really.
Ray: Yeah, you were the bully.
Vinny: Middle school, really, was kinda funner than high school.
R: Why?
Vinny: Because, like, you get over…I don’t know…You get over here (high school), people, they…lemme see what I’m tryin’ to say…
Al: Like, people grow up and move on…
Vinny: Yeah, mature, but, like, over here, they got, like, a lot of stupid things that we get in trouble for. So that would kinda make it bad. I mean, at a point, I mean, this kinda is funner than middle school, but sometimes, the way the teacher show their actions toward the students make it boring.
R: Ok. Talk about your experiences with authority figures in general. This could be policemen; this could be teachers; this could be administrators.
Vinny: My, my, I’m the same toward police and teachers. Toward police, I like, like certain police. Like, like, I don’t really like a lot of ‘em ‘cause they known for harassing you, so, so my thoughts toward police, I don’t hate all of ‘em. I don’t hate ‘em, yeah, because people say they hate the police, but, I mean, if you really look at it, like, if somebody break in your house, who you gonna call? You gonna call the police. So you can’t really hate ‘em ‘cause you gonna need ‘em.
R: So are teachers the same way then?
Vinny: Yeah. To me, teachers like, I think of teachers like, some teachers, not all…
Al: Like, what I do, I try to make friends with all my teachers ‘cause, like, I wanna go to college for football, and the coaches come and talk to the teachers, get some background off of you, and I don’t wanna have no enemy-type of teachers to give me a bad, give me a bad compliment. So I just make friends with all my teachers. On the first day, you gotta try to make friends.
Vinny: I made friends with, like, what, prob’ly like three of my teachers—Miss Simmons, uh, Miss Clavier, Coach Haydel…that’s it. But it’s just one teacher that…
R: What, what do teachers have to do for you guys to earn your respect?
Vinny: Show respect, show respect back ‘cause sometimes, like, teachers say they wanna be treated with respect, but they don’t show students respect. Like some of ‘em expect that they can just holler at you and don’t expect nothin’ to get said back. But I look at it like, I mean, I’m seventeen, I’m about to be eighteen. I’m a young adult. So, like, I want you to talk to me with some respect, in a good tone, not just, you know, yell at me, expect me not to, you know, do nothin’ back.
R: Ok. Anybody else? Because y’all have kind of been quiet.

DJ: See, to me, police and teachers and everybody else, they doin' their jobs. We make mistakes, and they just gotta do their jobs and try to correct it.
Vinny: They do their job, but sometimes they don't do it in the right way.
Al: People that talk back to teachers, they prob'ly not used to getting fussed at at home. It all starts at home.
Vinny: Yeah. I get fussed at a lot at home. It just, it's a respect thing. If you want me to respect you, you gotta respect me.
Al: You, not yet, you not taught right from wrong. So, when you go to school, you do something retarded, and the teacher fuss at you, you wanna fuss back at 'em 'cause you don't know what you did 'cause you not taught that at home. It all starts at home.
R: Ok. So do you feel like your own parents, Al, have done a good job of showing you that at home?
Al: Yeah. I think they did. I know right from wrong, but I still make stupid decisions. But I don't blame my parents. It's all on me. 'Cause they taught me, and now I'm grown, and I can't blame my parents for nothin' now. It's all on me right now.
Vinny: I'm the type, like, say if I did somethin' wrong, like, me and Lateisha. Like, say if I get written up for throwin' somethin', I admit to my mistake. Like, I go in administrator's office, I be like, "Yeah, I did that. You know, I'm gonna take my lick." That's my, you know, but I also be like, like, sometimes, say like, like it be the littlest things you get fussed at, but the big things, when you doin' good, you know, you never get commented (complimented) on, but you always get commented on bad things.
DJ: You supposed to.
R: You're supposed to what?
DJ: Get commented on bad things 'cause you supposed to see if you could do it better, do it right.
Ray: See, I'm gonna be honest—we kids; we not supposed to get respect like adults because we still got our whole life to go ahead and to tell you what you doin' wrong. If you don't like it, you gotta suck it up, you gotta do it right.
DJ: But, you know, at a certain time, I'm sayin', though, we kids, we don't supposed to get that (respect). So, like, I mean, yeah, you have a right for something, like, you can't just let nobody talk to you any kinda way, son. It's like…
Al: No, it's not…
Vinny: So, you sayin', like, a adult, adult get respect, so you sayin' just because we kids that, you know, they could just yell at us any kinda way.
Al: Don't ever, don't ever get in grown folks' business.
Vinny: Yeah, that's the worst thing you could ever do.
Al: Like, my mom and dad's talkin', and I'm sittin' there. They gonna tell me, "Get up and go somewhere else" 'cause I'm not supposed to listen to that. That's between them two.
Vinny: My mom and them, like, when they talk, she don't really tell me go nowhere, but, like, when I was smaller, she did 'cause…like, like, right now, my momma startin' to look at me as a man 'cause she said I only got one more year. I'll be eighteen next year, so I'm out on my own.
R: So what, so what makes a man, then? Is a man…
Vinny: Responsibility.
R: Is a man an age? Or is a man when you act a certain way and get a certain age?
Vinny: To me, to me, it's…it's kinda not both 'cause you could be the old, you could be old as, old as, you know…

Al: Old as dirt, still act like a child…
Vinny: But if you act like a child, and you do childish things, you not a man; you still a kid.
R: So how does a man act?
Vinny: A man takes responsibilities, I can't really say enough about that 'cause that's, like, the number one thing about being a man…
Al: A man could be serious and boring, and I don't like the boring father. Like, I like somebody to have fun with you, but there's a limit, like a certain amount, so being a man is pretty hard to judge. Being a man is pretty hard to judge.
DJ: To me, a man, you gotta do what you gotta do. You gotta take care, like, you gotta do everything, like, you know what I mean? You gotta do what you gotta do.
R: Ok. So let me ask you this. Is a thug or a gangsta a man?
Al: Oh, no!
Ray: No. (laughs)
DJ: He shouldn't even have a child, you heard.
Vinny: Um, it depends…
Al: …what type of thug or gangsta he is.
Vinny: Yeah, what type of thug or gangsta…
R: We have types of thugs and gangstas?
Vinny and Al: Yeah.
R: I'm learning something new every day. Explain to me.
Vinny: Yeah, you could have a good thug…
Al: You could have bad thug, a type of gangsta.
Vinny: You got a good thug, somebody who about their business…
R: There's a good thug?
Al: There's a good thug, there's a bad thug, there's a medium thug, there's a rare thug…
Vinny: Like, say I have a child, that child take responsibility, I mean, he got my respect because he fully takin' his responsibility.
R: So a thug is not always bad.
Al: No.
Vinny: No.
R: Is a, is a thug the same thing as a gangsta?
Vinny: No.
R: A thug's not the same thing as a gangsta. What's the difference, Al?
Vinny: To me, to me, a gangsta…
Al: I'm a gangsta.
R: Oh, you are? (group laughs)
Al: Yeah, I'm a thug.
Ray: You wish.
Vinny: I'm not nothin'. I ain't nothin', son. It's really a lifestyle. If you grew up around the type of environment that, that really don't care, like, like, if your respect really high, like, if you could walk through anybody neighborhood or somethin', like, you not supposed to be there, but you still got respect…
DJ: A thug and a gangsta the same thing; they just have different terms, different names.
Vinny: Yeah, son, it's really the same thing.
DJ: Martin Luther King would tell you the same thing, but he would tell you straight up…
Al: Martin Luther King was a gangsta…

Group: (laughs)
Ray: Why he said Martin Luther King a gangsta?
DJ: Martin Luther King a gangsta? Why was he a gangsta?
Al: Alright. Who walks around…Alright, it's racism, everything that's going on. Who walks around with a whole group of people in the middle of D.C….
DJ: Fight for rights that we have now.
Al: Right. He a gangsta.
DJ: He…
Al: What man you know goin' do that right now? Nobody!
DJ: You got white people say the "N" word, black people say the "N" word…
Vinny: I think he (MLK) prob'ly be rolling over in his grave.
Ray: You can't stop that.
DJ: We wouldn't be able to do the things we have…
Al: Which one would walk right now in the middle of the street and speak out for us?
DJ: If he wouldn't have did all that, I tell you right now, it would still be like it was in the 60s.
Al: She (researcher) wouldn't even be right here right now.
DJ: We would still be in the back of the bus if it wasn't for him. Rosa Parks wouldn't have got the recognition she did, have all that fightin' for us. Like John F. Kennedy. He and Martin Luther King worked together, and if it wasn't for him, if it wasn't for Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy would never have, like, given us equal rights, like…
Al: We still got segregation and racism…
DJ: Yeah, but still…
Vinny: You wanna know another president who worked to free us from racism? Abraham Lincoln. But, to me, this is another thing that I don't like about being black. A black person get, I mean, I take this word offensively, too. But, like, a black person could get mad when a white person say "nigger," but, at the same time, like, we call each other that. Like, you know, it really don't make sense 'cause we still call each other…
Al: If a white person put a "er" on the end of it, then that's the bad one.
Vinny: Yeah, but it's still the same thing.
R: So the "a" on the end is…
Al: Yeah, the "a," 'cause we use the "a" one. But you put the "er" on it, that's…
Vinny: That's what I'm saying. Black people use it toward each other, but…Man, I don't understand black people. I really don't.
Group: (laughs)
Al: For real!
R: Ok. Let me ask you this. Do y'all feel at any point like, because you're black, that you are either, that people assume things about you or that you have struggles that white people don't have? Or that there are certain assumptions?
Vinny: Yeah.
DJ: No. No.
R: You're saying no?
DJ: They got some, some type of people, not all the people…
Al: I think some people feel that way toward us, not all the people…
DJ: Like, stereotype people…
Vinny: In reality, they got a couple of teachers at this school like that. They do codes. Like, they say it in codes, like I don't understand. But I understand. And the way they act…I don't really

say nothin' 'cause, you know, just kill 'em with kindness. I don't really say nothin'. I just let it go.
R: Now, Al, you specifically had a different experience because of being a lighter skinned or mixed—I mean that in a respectful tone. Do you have a different experience in that sense?
Al: Oh, yeah.
R: Ok. Explain that.
Al: Uh, I'm on the baseball team, and you know, baseball team is really for white people. And, yeah, it's pretty hard being on the baseball team because I'm black.
DJ: Jackie Robinson.
Al: And, uh, one day, we had a game, and my dad, he walks out there, and he's black—he's like his color (points to a dark-skinned black boy)—and the man said, "Which one is your son?" because nobody out there is black, and I fit in with everybody. And my dad said, "What do you mean?" And they're like, "Which one is your son?" And he pointed at me. And he was like, "No way!" And I think I blend in with the white people…
R: And when you say you blend in, do you mean just color-wise? Or do you mean, like, in the things that you think are important, in the way that you talk, in the way that you dress? Like, explain that—when you say you fit in with them.
Al: I would say color-wise, probably.
R: In any other way?
Al: Sometimes dressing—color, dressing, talking.
Vinny: You still got that black in you, though. You loud. Black people loud!
R: (laughs)
Vinny: Black people are loud.
Al: I would say my personality's white. I don't know why, but I guess I was raised in a type of way with respect. My dad hates when people sag their pants. Or…he don't even like when they say the "N" word.
Vinny: That's another thing I think why people are really stereotyped about black men. Because if you really pay attention and you look, like, you look at the populations in the pen, in jail, prisons, correctional facilities—it's full of black people!
DJ: Yeahhh.
Vinny: It really is.
R: Ok. Do you think that is because they all deserve to be there? Is it because people are looking out for them because they stereotype?
Vinny: It's both. Like, some…
Al: They ain't got no other choice.
Vinny: Like, some people deserve to be there, but some people are out to get you.
R: Some people don't have a choice? Like, which people?
Al: Like, the ones that sell drugs, for instance. They probably poor, and they wanna give support to their family, try to, like, raise their brother. And they go and sell drugs just to help 'em out. Then they get caught. Then they go to jail. And they start stereotyping, saying like, "He bad! Why would he sell drugs?"
Vinny: Yeah!
R: Ok. DJ.
DJ: You (Al) know how you said, "Baseball's a white sport" and all this stuff's for a white man? (referring to Al's previous statements about baseball as a white man's sport) I guarantee you, if we was all equal back then, we wouldn't be thinkin' that. If we was all equal back then, there

wouldn't be racism, prejudice, because, like, as we think of it now, like, football, football was made when everything was equal. And people now thinks it's a black man sport.
Vinny: It's stupid because at the end of the day, we all God's children. We all God's children.
R: Ray, you've been very quiet.
Ray: What the question was?
Group: (laughs)
R: Do you have any input on this whole idea of stereotypes, stereotyping black people, on how black people supposedly act? Any of that?
Ray: No.
R: No?
Vinny: Once again, black people are loud.
R: Ok.
Vinny: They don't, like, you gotta admit, son—this library could be quiet right now. If it got one ghetto, ghetto black person come in here, they say one word…
Group: (laughs)
R: Ok. What's the difference between ghetto, gangsta, and thug?
Vinny: To me, like, ghetto do ghetto things. Ghetto, to me, is like when you don't care.
Al: You just "out there" with everything you do.
DJ: Ok. A black person, an average black guy just like everybody else. On the other hand, you got—I'm gonna come up with a new term—nigga-ology.
Ray: What the fuck?
Group: (laughs)
DJ: Nigga-ology, bro! And that's what y'all say different--ghetto, thug, and gangsta. I'm gonna put it like this: There's a black guy, and there's a nigger. Y'all wanna put it out there, so there you go!
R: Ok. So does anybody at this table consider themselves to be a gangsta, thug, or ghetto?
Al: Or nigga-ology.
Vinny: I'm not a gangsta.
DJ: Which one of y'all consider yourself a nigga?
R: Why do people walk around and say, "I'm a gangsta!" like it's something good?
Vinny: I think a lot, they try to be "dogs."
Ray: Yeah, try to get respected.
R: Why would you respect someone who's bad?
Al: You don't wanna get shot, get beat up.
Vinny: People be askin' me that…
R: Is it a way of looking tough?
Vinny: You can stand your ground, but you don't have to be a gangsta, and I think that's a lot of the problem with a lot of people out there. 'Cause they see this person doin' something, so they gonna say they that. And they gonna try and do what that person did. But at the end of the day, it don't go down like that because…I know people, like, I know real gangstas, I really do. My life compared to their life…
Al: Completely different.
Vinny: I'm way below being a gangsta. Like, my rank—even if I did try to be a gangsta, I'd never be that low.
R: So y'all are saying that some people who pretend to be gangstas…
Vinny: My cousin Ellis, just got juvenile life for somethin' stupid, a robbery.

R: So who's your, who are your role models?
Vinny: My role model bad—he in prison, I think. But I like his music a lot.
R: Who?
Vinny: Boosie. But at the same time, he not a bad role model 'cause a lot of people, if you really listen to Boosie's…
Al: Man, he not a role model…
Vinny: If you listen to his music. You ever listen to "Chill Out"? It's too late to be a thug. Chill out. That man tellin' you real stuff.
R: (To DJ) Who's your role model?
DJ: All the black people that came say all this stuff instead of makin' it like y'all talkin' about, gangsta stuff, that's, y'all shouldn't even say Martin Luther King y'all role model; y'all should say all these rappers and fake thugs are y'all's role model, that's what y'all should say.
R: So you think that rappers are fake thugs?
Vinny: A lot of 'em is.
Al: So, wait, wait, wait—you said that Martin Luther King *should* be a role model instead of these rappers?
DJ: Yes.
Al: Alright. You said it backwards.
DJ: Especially since he (MLK) wouldn't wanna be no rapper. He woulda been dissed y'all, man.
Al: (laughs)
DJ: He wouldn't.
Al: So you like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King and all them?
DJ: Yeah. They actually make sense instead of makin' no sense at all and doin' all the stupid stuff that's gettin' y'all in trouble and makin' other people look bad, like people that actually make sense. Like, look down, like, the non-gangsta people…
Al: The black people, like nigga-ology.
DJ: Yeah. Yeah. The black people. That makes us look bad. People like, "Man, they gotta lot of black people that do this. Everybody must be like that."
R: Ok. You seem to have a different frame of reference, DJ, where you don't, you don't, like, pay attention to a lot of these things or follow a lot of these things.
DJ: Oh, I know about 'em; I just don't represent 'em.
R: Why don't you represent them? Is it because of your family? Like, were you taught differently? Did you, have you lived here your whole life?
DJ: Yeah.
R: Yeah. Ok. Why do you think that you might think differently from a lot of these other folks? What's different about you?
DJ: I taught myself different because my family never taught me, like, taught me about that. Well, I taught myself different. I taught my own self. And, um…
R: Ok. What made you not want to follow the bad group?
DJ: 'Cause lots of people say things about you, and you go to jail, and that's not good.
Vinny: Another thing people should realize, like, you know, try to be a gangsta, I mean, in 2000—Monte (fellow male student killed in shooting in 2011) died in '11, right?
Al: Yeah.
Vinny: That shoulda put a lot of standby on people, like, just to show that life really not a joke. That man died when he was fifteen. I grew up with this dude. In that field (on their street), me and Monte used to be out there. Like, we were best friends, and then we moved away, so we

kinda got separated. But we always was cool, son. That shoulda put a lot of standby on people, like, to show that life really not no joke. That man died. A good dude at that—a good dude. Like, you never heard about that man doin' nothin' bad. He never was caught up in nothin'. He just went down there (a rival neighborhood) on the wrong night, and that shoulda put a lot of standby on people to show that life really not a joke. The thing about it, I mean, it really, that was black on black, a black person killing a black person.
Al: Over some stupid stuff.
Vinny: Over some stupid stuff.
Ray: On Facebook…
Vinny: And a lot of people still wanna be out there, like, y'all should pay attention and learn from that. I mean, it ain't a mistake 'cause it coulda been avoided.
DJ: You see, you know that little nickname "Young Niggas In Charge" (area gang)? Tell you the truth, 'cause of that, they shoulda been stopped that. Sayin' they gangstas…
Vinny: And that was a good dude, always be smilin', man.
R: So, DJ, you're saying that people here who claim to be gangstas and all really aren't.
DJ: They could actually be, like, people. They not bad. Like, kids that say they bad, they not bad at all. They good people. They just followin' the wrong path.
R: Ok. One more thing. Talk about the influence of friends.
Vinny: Yeah, your friends, you hang around a bad crowd, you, you, 99% of the time, you gonna do what your friends do. But if your mindframe strong, and you know that's not what you wanna do, then you'll just get from around that. Or talk to 'em, like, "Hey, man, we could still be friends, but what you doin' not right, so, you know, I rather keep my distance for a while."
R: Al and Ray, y'all have kind of been quiet. Anything that you would like to add?
Al: You have to surround yourself with good influences.
Ray: Yeah.
Vinny: 'Cause I could tell you right now, if you around somebody that's smokin' drugs, you will smoke drugs.
Al: Unless you have a very strong mind.
Vinny: Unless you have a strong mind. If your mind very strong, and you determined that you not gonna do that. But if you easily influenced, son, you gonna do it, so…
R: And where does that good mind come from?
Vinny: I think it come from, like, if you got good parents…But some people that do it have good parents. I think a good mind is just something that's natural, like you always been wanting to not mess with that, like, from day one, when you first started talking right and all that, you made a vow to yourself that you'll never do that. I think that's where a good mindframe come in, by keepin' your word.
R: Ok. What about school? Let's go back to school. What does school mean for y'all?
Al: Everything.
Vinny: School, it mean a lot to me, it's just that sometimes, the majority of the time, I just can't get along with my teachers. But everybody need school. I gonna tell my child, when I have one, I mean, he not gonna be no thug. I'm gonna whip his ass. He gonna be a college kid.
DJ: They be havin' people say, "Oh, I hate school. I'm gonna drop outta school." They got things going on at home and with teachers and stuff. To tell you the truth, they shouldn't be worryin' about all that. They should be worryin' about themselves, getting' themselves independent, be a better person, so they don't have to go through that no more.

Vinny: Like, people gettin' pregnant? They like, "Man, I gotta drop out for my baby." Man, you droppin' out for your baby? What good that gonna do? 'Cause when you get in the real world, you not gonna have no control over, job's gonna come, pampers gonna have to come, so you gonna be stuck, and you gonna be like, "Oh, man." Then you gonna think…
R: So school…
Vinny: "I wish I coulda went back to school…" School really mean a lot 'cause if you in a predicament like that, and you determined, you gotta have it on your mind like, "Look, I'm gonna go to school; I'm gonna graduate and get my diploma; I'm gonna do it for me and my baby and my family."
R: So is school then make you who you are? Or not really?
Al: Yeah.
Vinny: It really does. 'Cause it's like the main stage of your life 'cause you always need it in your life.
Al: Everybody need school. But school is not made for everybody.
Vinny: It ain't, yeah.
R: School is not for everybody. Ok. Explain that.
Al: School's not made for everybody because some people, they're not very intelligent, and they give up on themselves 'cause people bring 'em down, call 'em stupid, dumb, and they just drop out of school 'cause they just give up on themselves and settle for less instead of staying in school and learning and getting help and have a better education to prove…anybody can do it instead of dropping out.
Vinny: Right now, I'm kind of havin' a thought about it (dropping out), thought about dropping out, but, like, when I drop out, I'm not just gonna drop out so I can sit on my butt. Like, I'm gonna try to go to vo-tech, get my GED and stuff. But I don't kinda know 'cause, like, you think that'll be alright, Miss?
R: Yes.
Al: What?
R: He's saying vo-tech.
Vinny: 'Cause, like, I thought about it, like, get my GED faster and stuff.
Al: Why don't you just stay in school?
Vinny: Because, like, over here, to me, I don't like it over here. 'Cause, like, days when I come to school…
Al: It's not gonna get any easier at vo-tech.
Vinny: I think a new environment will be better 'cause like, days, sometimes when I come over here, teachers they be actin' all mad for reason…there's a reason why they be mad, but they take their anger out on you. And that's my deal every day, if you pay attention. Like, some of my teachers, they don't even try to help me. They say they do, but you could tell they don't really care. All they worried about is…
Al: They got theirs. College not that easy, no. You go to college, you gotta write notes.
DJ: Do what you gotta do.
Al: In college, you gotta learn on your own.
R: So is school, then, just something you have to get through, like do your time, like you would in jail? I mean, is that what y'all are saying?
Vinny: No, like, it's funner than jail 'cause nobody wanna be in jail. Like, but it's the same sometimes.
Ray: Nobody wanna be in school.

Vinny: Yeah, you right, Miss. It's kinda the same, like sometimes people don't wanna be in school…
R: So you're just doing your time here?
Ray: Yeah.
Al: You just doin' your time.
R: So you don't come every day and really get something out of it?
Al: Oh, I do.
DJ: Oh, yeah.
Vinny: I learned a lot, like presidents and all that. Without school, I wouldn't know all that. Math facts, counting money—school teach you all that.
R: Has school made you a better person or made you want to learn more?
Vinny: Yeah.
R: Does it do that for you or not really?
Vinny: Yeah.
Ray: (Shakes head "no")
Al: I just go day by day.
Vinny: I would like to have a lot of opportunities; it's just the pain I have to go through will make me stronger.
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Vita

Angelle Leblanc Hebert, a native of Thibodaux, Louisiana, received her bachelor's degree in history from Nicholls State University in 1995. She then began her teaching career with her first teaching job at Vandebilt Catholic High School in 1996. During this time, she also returned to school to complete certification requirements for secondary English and social studies. Upon completion of certification, she continued on for her master's degree in Administration and Supervision, which she received from Nicholls State University in December 2005. In August 2006, she entered doctoral studies at Louisiana State University, all the while continuing her teaching career. Throughout her years in graduate school, she taught English continuously in area high schools, for a total of eighteen years, and also spent two years in high school administration. She is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Nicholls State University, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate course in instructional methods and educational leadership. She will receive her doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction from Louisiana State University in August 2013.